The ARVN IV Corps commander, General Nguyen Van Manh, did not ride to the sound of the guns. Instead, he took refuge in his residence in Can Tho, behind a barbed wire fence and heavily manned bunker positions. Taking no chances, he ordered his two Ranger battalions not to fight the VC but to secure his headquarters and house and the streets around them. For two entire weeks, all ARVN ground movement in the Mekong Delta stopped. Revolutionary Development hamlets that had been listed by Bob Komer as "secure" were abandoned to the communists.

The ARVN units assigned to defend those CORDS pacification projects were pulled back to the provincial capitals, along with the RD teams. The ruff-puffs who remained took one look at the encroaching VC and abandoned their outposts with little resistance. The civilian population of the Delta, terrified by the VC attacks, fled the major towns, clogging the already cratered roads with throngs of refugees. The ARVN had made no arrangements for such a crisis. There was no checkpoint or control system, which meant that the enemy could hide among the refugees, gathering intelligence, traveling in their midst, and blocking the movement of reaction forces. The National Police stuck to the cities, not daring to venture onto the roads outside. General Manh's dereliction of duty in IV Corps was so extreme, even by ARVN standards, that MACV forced his removal. Despite commanding three South Vietnamese divisions, five Ranger battalions, and several Marine battalions, General Manh had left the Mekong Delta to its fate. In Saigon, a complicit Thieu awaited the disgraced corps commander and immediately promoted him to the post of inspector general of the army.[6]

MACV had earlier delegated all supply support in IV Corps to the ARVN, as a first step toward handing the entire war over to them. The experiment failed under the stress of Tet, and the Americans had to hurry back in. A US adviser in the Delta remarked that "the chaos here anticipates exactly what will happen during 'Vietnamization.'"[7]

Despite ample warning of Tet, the ARVN and ruff-puffs had been caught unprepared. Though they had canceled cease-fire leaves in I Corps on January 29 and leaves everywhere else on the thirtieth, those measures initially had no effect, for the ARVN had no way to contact troops who had already left for home.

Even President Thieu had ignored urgent appeals from Westmoreland to remain at his post in Saigon and departed for his wife's home at My Tho in the Mekong Delta. ARVN combat battalions everywhere remained at 50 percent of their duty strength throughout the Tet Offensive. In the Delta, some of them had bothered to stockpile ammo or even top up their fuel tanks, which meant that some units couldn't fight at all and others had to ration their fire and movement. They couldn't be resupplied by road or river. The roads were blocked and the canals were under constant attack by the VC. The South Vietnamese forces could hardly even communicate. The VC had cut every one of their phone lines.[8]

Seventy-two ARVN and ruff-puff firebases and garrisons in the Delta were cut off for over fourteen days and had to be resupplied by MACV's already overused air assets, chiefly the 164th Aviation Group, which had been established at Can Tho to backstop the ARVN just two weeks earlier.

Medical care in the Delta also fell to the Americans, most of the Saigon government's medical personnel having run away when the communists attacked, and stayed away. An American captain attached to IV Corps headquarters in Can Tho marveled at the exertions of the American pilots: "The ARVN survived only because of these emergency deliveries." US pilots delivered everything—aviation and motor gas, diesel, lubricants, ammo, rations, and water. They also flew in thousands of ARVN troops who had been stranded on leave, moved maneuver units from place to place, and handled the evacuation of ARVN casualties, which was particularly urgent because the ARVN had not pre-stocked blood or oxygen, and the VNAF helicopters in the Delta refused to fly because of their "restrictive regulations," which were always risk-averse and never more so than during a holiday or a battle.[9]

The commander of II Field Force Vietnam, General Fred Weyand, had felt the storm brewing and, three weeks earlier, had received Westmoreland's permission to move most of his corps back to the Saigon Circle. With twenty-seven US maneuver battalions and six ARVN divisions, Weyand had the combat power to take on the thirty-five VC battalions that launched the Tet assault in III Corps. He was immediately put to the test.[10]

Late on January 30, an armed VC caught at a checkpoint in Saigon divulged that he was on his way to attack Tan Son Nhut Airport. The Capital Military District went on full alert at 10 p.m., warning troops in the city to stop every ARVN vehicle and search it for impostors. At 2:45 a.m. on January 31, a nineteen-man VC sapper platoon blasted a hole in the wall

of the US embassy and crawled inside. They knew exactly where they were going, for two of their number were VC employed by the US State Department inside the embassy. Two MPs guarding the embassy grounds fired on the VC sappers as they wriggled through the hole in the wall, killing the two team leaders, but both MPs were shot in the back by the two VC already inside the compound, men who had quietly worked as embassy drivers before the offensive.[11]

There was only a small group of Marines and MPs defending the embassy when the VC sappers broke in, but they reacted smartly, sealing the embassy building, alerting the rest of the Marine contingent to return to the embassy from their barracks five blocks away, and picking off the VC in the compound one by one.

The VC sappers had forty pounds of C-4 with them—more than enough explosive to blast their way into the chancery building, where a half dozen embassy employees huddled fearfully. But their leaders had been shot and killed coming through the wall. The surviving sappers had been told that they would be reinforced by VC infantry and that crowds of pro-VC, anti-war students would join them on the embassy grounds. None of that support materialized. Instead, the embassy defenders began to strike back. Five Americans were killed in the shoot-out, but their hard-pressed fellows pinned the confused attackers in the embassy gardens long enough for additional MPs and Marines to arrive, as well as a platoon of 101st Airborne troops, who landed on the embassy roof to secure the chancery and grounds. By 9 a.m., Westmoreland and Bunker declared the embassy secure. All nineteen VC were dead, and only one of the American reaction forces was wounded.[12]

But tremendous damage had been done at home in the United States. On the networks, the evening news at 6:30 p.m. on January 30 carried the first reports of the assault in Saigon, where it was 5:30 a.m. the next day. News that the Viet Cong had penetrated the US embassy was reported to a disbelieving public. America had been fighting on the ground since 1965, had over 500,000 troops in-country, had suffered over 20,000 killed, and Westmoreland had just pronounced victory imminent. And yet here were the VC, inside the South Vietnamese capital, inside the walls of the US embassy, and fighting toward Thieu's presidential palace.

On Capitol Hill, even sympathetic senators deplored LBJ's failure to preempt the offensive, and his underestimation of the VC. "You have been saying the situation with the Viet Cong was one of diminishing morale," Senator Robert Byrd confronted the president. "What has happened?"[13]

In Saigon, the invaders made early gains against a defenseless capital. The eleven VC battalions that had infiltrated Saigon before the offensive assembled at their regrouping points and began attacking their objectives—police posts, headquarters, radio transmitters, and government buildings. Skirmishes flared across the city as the VC battalions, fighting in company, platoon, or squad strength, tried to capture key objectives.

ARVN units in Saigon were posted in camp areas on the outskirts and were not supposed to operate in the city's crowded precincts. Saigon's defense was entrusted to the commander of the National Police, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, a Ky crony and an Air Force officer. Loan, who had taken the precaution of defending his own headquarters with a battalion of South Vietnamese Marines, was fortunate that he had, for without them he probably would have been swept up and killed.

In theory, 3,000 National Police were supposed to garrison the capital. There were 200 of them in each of Saigon's nine precincts and 1,000 more at the National Police headquarters. But with most of the police at home with their families, only a third of Saigon's National Police were on duty—fewer than 1,000 for the entire city. For emergencies such as this one, Loan also had three 400-man paramilitary Police Field Force battalions based in Saigon. But these units, well armed and trained, were also gutted by Tet leaves, some of the 400-man battalions having fewer than thirty men on duty when the communists struck. The older cops, who had joined during the French administration, generally skulked out of harm's way. The younger ones did most of the fighting, but not well. They had to be yanked off the line and provided with thirty minutes of "improvised refresher training" in the middle of the battle to familiarize themselves with weapons and tactics.

General Loan, who had built this 100,000-man police empire, had done it in the usual Saigon way—piling up budgets, perks, and influence, with no regard for performance. The cops lacked cars and radios, and their "reserves" turned out to be clerical workers, most of whom were on leave

or had fled. Loan ordered all officers up to the age of thirty-five to report for duty on February 7. Two days later, he ordered all men up to age forty-five to join the fighting, with no noticeable effect. The cops who turned up were exhausted and hungry. Unlike the army, they were not given rations. With the markets closed and combat raging, Saigon's policemen were observed knocking on doors to beg for food and water.[14]

General Loan committed one of the only acts of police daring in the first days, shooting a handcuffed VC prisoner in the head in front of NBC's television cameras, an exploit that stunned American viewers, who had supposed that the Saigon regime was more lawful than the communists.

Loan's televised execution of a prisoner may have been, as *New York Times* reporter Tom Buckley put it, "the turning point—the moment when the American public turned against the war." Eddie Adams' photo of the murder, showing the agonized face of the VC captive at the instant when Loan pulled the trigger, found its way onto the cover of the next *Newsweek*, and leered accusingly from America's newsstands, coffee tables, and waiting rooms.[15]

In Saigon, VC attacks on the presidential palace, broadcast facilities, and the Joint General Staff headquarters were all repulsed. The lightly armed Viet Cong struggled to make a dent in weak defenses that, thanks to American mobility, were swiftly reinforced. VC documents captured in the battle revealed deep frustration with the communist failure to stop American air and overland reinforcement of the capital, as well as the absence of spontaneous popular support from the inhabitants of Saigon. "VC/NVA elements failed to motivate the local populace," one report read. It concluded that the early gains could not be consolidated "because there were not enough replacements from locals" to replace VC casualties in the offensive.[16]

The communist attacks spanned the entire Saigon Circle: Saigon, Tan Son Nhut Airport, Bien Hoa Airbase, and Long Binh Post, which was the headquarters of II Field Force and the seat of the Army's 1st Aviation Brigade. Long Binh was the prize. Everything was there: signals, engineers, two evacuation hospitals, the biggest supply dump in the country, and over 40 percent of American helicopters in Vietnam. In Saigon, where there were no US combat troops besides the Marines guarding the US embassy, three VC local-force battalions breached the wire at Tan Son Nhut, the headquarters of the VNAF and the US 7th Air Force, and nearly seized the two 10,000-foot concrete runways as well as Westmoreland's headquarters in the neighboring MACV compound.

Westmoreland was stunned by the speed with which the recently opened "Pentagon East" was encircled and attacked. He and his staff descended to the command bunker for a last stand, pausing only to transfer Westy's authority to US Army headquarters in Long Binh, in case MACV was overrun. The enemy was held just short of its objectives by US Air Force reaction forces and two ARVN companies and then, after three hours of combat, was defeated by a squadron of the US 4th Cavalry Regiment, which rolled in at 6 a.m. from its camp northwest of Saigon to hit the VC in the rear with tanks.[17]

VC mortars cratered the runway at Bien Hoa at 2:48 a.m. on January 31, preventing any jets from taking off. The VC 274th and 275th Regiments then stormed the air base, getting into the bunker line and nearly breaking through the perimeter. The air base was saved by the arrival at 9 a.m. of a battalion of the 101st Airborne Division and a troop of armored cavalry from the 9th ID, but also by the heroics of its Army gunships, which, as everywhere, were on "strip alert" and got aloft in thirty seconds or less.

Sixty-eight gunships, grouped in "light fire teams," were all the air cover available in the Saigon Circle until about 1 p.m., when the first fighter jet was able to take off from the hastily repaired runway at Bien Hoa. The gunships swarmed over Saigon, Bien Hoa, and Long Binh, attacking enemy mortar and rocket sites, following the river lines and destroying 520 sampans used to ferry enemy troops and ammo, and then mowing down nearly 2,000 men of the two VC regiments. In 18,000 sorties, the restless gunships fired over 100,000 rocket and artillery rounds and 6.4 million rounds of machine gun ammo. The VC attackers, who had closed so eagerly on the Bien Hoa–Long Binh complex, were torn to shreds.[18]

The communist plan had been for local forces to infiltrate the cities and to be quickly reinforced by inflowing waves of main-force units, who would exploit the prevailing chaos to move into the cities. In Saigon, the plan was foiled by the fast reaction of the US 101st Airborne Division, which clung to the Bien Hoa–Long Binh complex, and by the US 1st Infantry Division, which repulsed a VC attack on their base camp and then made heavy contact with the VC 273rd Regiment at Phu Cuong City, the provincial capital, which lay just east of them.

Phu Cuong was the sort of critical junction the communists needed to take and hold in order to reinforce the combat in Saigon. A river and three highways converged there, but the Americans caught the VC on the move and killed nearly 400 of them. The fighting was confused, the initial VC boldness replaced by caution as the Americans scrambled "lightships" with searchlights to illuminate the VC companies and then target them with air strikes and artillery.

The VC, stunned by the speed of the American reaction, backed into the surrounding hamlets to shelter among the inhabitants and buy time while the Big Red One sought "political and provincial clearance" to fire into the village of An My, on the northwestern edge of Phu Loi Base Camp. The clearance was given, and the Americans obliterated the village and its hamlets under 5,000 rounds of field artillery and air strikes with cluster bomblets and 500-pound bombs. Picking through the wreckage on February 1, the grunts of the 1st ID would find another 197 corpses of the VC 273rd Regiment.[19]

Brutal counterattacks like these stopped the VC main-force units short of Saigon, depriving the infiltrators in the capital of crucial reinforcements. The US 25th Infantry Division did the same to the VC 271st and 272nd Regiments, halting their drive on the capital. The tanks and APCs of the US 4th Cavalry Regiment that saved Tan Son Nhut Airport at 6 a.m. on February 1 traveled on Route 1, which the VC were supposed to have cut, and across bridges that the VC were supposed to have dropped. VC troops missed their assignments there, and also on Route 13, where another American armored battalion at Loc Ninh was able to race right past a VC division on the outskirts of Saigon to relieve the ARVN III Corps headquarters. "The communists were snared by their own strategy," Weyand's ops chief observed. "They needed local forces to cut the key roads and bridges, but they sent those local forces into the urban fighting and left non-local NVA and other units who didn't know the area to cut the roads."[20]

Because of these prompt and effective American counterattacks, the VC and NVA units in the Saigon Circle could not reinforce the sputtering attacks inside the capital. On the contrary, they were themselves destroyed. Scheduled to enter Saigon in the days after February 2, they instead found themselves trapped between their base areas and Saigon—*easy meat for* American airpower and artillery. "They took a terrific pasting," *General Weyand's headquarters reported.* In the first week of February, Weyand estimated that his troops killed and captured 8,500 communists in the Saigon Circle. The victory hadn't been cheap—1,000 allied forces died in the same period—but it was lopsided.[21]

By midnight on January 31, Weyand had brought more maneuver battalions into Saigon than the communists had managed to infiltrate. The VC who *had* infiltrated could now be contained, run to ground, and killed. Most of the VC prisoners captured in Saigon came from central Vietnam. This fact suggested that the VC had far fewer Saigon adherents than they claimed, and was another explanation for the poor performance of the VC in the capital. They did not know the city and became utterly lost when separated from their guides. Even the guides got lost, failing in many cases to find street addresses where weapons and ammo were cached.[22]

All of Le Duan's optimistic assumptions about the Tet Offensive proved false. All of Defense Minister Giap's caution, which had led to his exile, proved warranted. The ARVN and ruff-puffs did *not* crumble under the onslaught of 84,000 communist troops, and the Americans did *not* retreat. With many of its battalions down to just 200 men because of Tet leaves, the ARVN stumbled early but then pulled itself together. Still, Weyand found his South Vietnamese ally far from effective. They didn't collapse tactically, but they did allow themselves to be pushed out of many areas, at which point they displayed the "perennial ARVN problem of counter-attacking," which was to say, *not* counterattacking, until the Americans showed up.[23]

The longest battle of the Tet Offensive flared through Hue in I Corps, where the fighting dragged on for three weeks. Hue exerted a special fascination for the North Vietnamese. Sited far to the north on Route 1, it sat halfway between the 16th and 17th parallels and was vulnerable to a communist land grab because of its nearness to the DMZ. It also had special significance to the South Vietnamese. It was a cradle of their country, its imperial palace the ancient seat of the Vietnamese emperors. The Viet Minh had tried to destroy the palace in 1945 "to sever Vietnam from its past," but the French had renovated and expanded it to give their puppet emperor a more imposing court and to accent traditional values of family loyalty and ancestor worship that the Viet Minh had tried to eradicate.

The three-week battle for Hue proved a couple of things. First, like the fighting around Saigon, it proved the truth of Bernard Fall's observation

that for the United States the war was, "in the short run, militarily 'unlosable'" owing to "the immense influx of American manpower and firepower." By no means had the now deceased Frenchman believed that it was winnable, just that it was "unlosable," in the sense that neither the NVA nor the VC had answers for American maneuverability, command of the air, and firepower. The communists lacked even a basic capability to sustain large-scale attacks. The US 1st Infantry Division made the same point after chewing up two VC main-force regiments that had attacked their base camp and attempted to drive on Saigon: "The enemy's problem is how to carry out his intentions based on *capability*." This gulf in capabilities between American and communist forces was too wide to bridge.[24]

The bitter combat in Hue also proved that the war, pitched by Westmoreland as nearing its end, was far from over. The tenacity of the communist fighters in Hue foreshadowed a conflict that would go on and on, beyond the "short run" favored by Americans, into a "long run" that, for the Americans, *would* be militarily losable. The White House struggled to understand how the situation could have flipped so quickly. "I have a question," Secretary of State Dean Rusk asked the Joint Chiefs at a meeting in the Cabinet Room during the battle. "In the past, we have said the problem really was finding the enemy. Now the enemy has come to us. I am sure many will ask why aren't we doing better now that we know where they are."[25]

For a man who had been congratulating himself on preventing the communist "scissors" from slicing across the country to the seacoast and its important cities of Hue and Da Nang, Westmoreland failed in Hue, as elsewhere, to prevent 6,000 NVA regulars from filtering through I Corps, infiltrating the city, and launching a reign of terror there. Don Oberdorfer, a Korean War vet who reported from Hue for the *Washington Post*, put this failure down to the usual mix of sloth and aloofness that characterized American and South Vietnamese cooperation.

Hue's police chief, a former sportscaster who sipped Johnnie Walker Black Label throughout the workday, did not send whatever intelligence he gleaned to the city's ARVN 1st Division, nor did the small CIA office in Hue communicate with the US military advisory team there. Radio intercepts of the NVA advance on Hue picked up by the US field station at Phu Bai, just eight miles south of Hue, were sent not to the city's defenders but to Da Nang for "analysis," where they languished.[26]

At 2:00 a.m. on January 31, three battalions of the NVA 6th Regiment and several VC units crossed the Perfume River in two places, attacked the Imperial Citadel at Hue, penetrated the forbidden city (that "nest of mandarins and monarchs"), and raised the yellow-starred flag of the Viet Cong over the Citadel. In the New City on the southern bank of the Perfume River, where most of Hue's 140,000 people lived, the NVA 4th Regiment assembled after picking its way through the rural districts around the city. They struck toward the MACV compound.

Long off-limits to US combat forces for political reasons, Hue nearly fell to this communist swipe. But a single company of General Ngo Quang Truong's ARVN 1st Division held fast in the division headquarters in the northeast corner of the Citadel. The general was reinforced that evening by his 3rd Regiment and three ARVN Airborne battalions. South of the city, small parties of Americans fought to slow the communist infiltration of South Vietnam's third-largest city, secure the MACV compound, and clear the south bank of the river.

After the initial onslaught, the communists held most of Hue except for tiny enclaves—the ARVN 1st Division headquarters inside the Citadel, the MACV headquarters in the New City on the south bank, and, most critically, the "LCU ramp." The ramp was Hue's south-bank river port, the place where troops, supplies, and ammo were shipped by sea from Da Nang and then up the Perfume River to Hue in LCUs (landing craft utility). Purely by chance, a platoon of four tanks and two self-propelled guns destined for Quang Tri City had just landed at the port when the attack began, providing the allied reaction forces with critical armored support.[27]

The battle would play out in three distinct areas: the Citadel, the New City, and the country surrounding Hue, an area of low hills, old imperial tombs, scrubby brush, and rice paddies. The NVA would have to hold this ground if they wanted to remain in Hue. Removing them from it was a key to saving the city. The Marines would focus on defending their own main supply route, which was the LCU ramp as well as Route 1, which ran right past the front gate of the beleaguered MACV compound. The ARVN 1st Division successfully retook the Citadel's airfield on February 1, allowing them to fly in reinforcements.

More ARVN reinforcements arrived by road that same day. Two ARVN Airborne battalions and a troop of twelve APCs shot their way into the

Citadel on February 1, losing 130 killed and wounded, many of them in four APCs that were pierced by NVA antitank guns. On February 2, the US 1st Cavalry Division began sending companies of its 3rd Brigade to take up positions north and west of Hue to prevent the communists from reinforcing the two NVA regiments, the sapper and rocket battalions, and the six local-force companies known to be inside the city.[28]

Hue's Citadel sprawled along the north bank of the Perfume River and enclosed a square mile of palace buildings erected over the years by the Vietnamese emperors. This was the old or forbidden city of Hue, shielded from the eyes of commoners by two stone walls, three feet thick and fifteen feet high, and a moat, fed by the river, that surrounded most of the Citadel. Between the outer and inner walls of the Citadel was a town of narrow lanes, heavy stone houses and buildings, high walls, and hedgerows. The residents of Hue had fortified their homes, with bunkers beneath them, broken glass cemented on the tops of the walls, and barbed wire laced through the hedges to deter assailants. Every home inside the old city was a defensive position. In southern Hue, the New City, the streets were wider and the houses easier to breach. Here there would be more room to maneuver.[29]

To take back the vital space around Hue and strangle the communists inside, the 3rd Brigade of the Cav and a battalion of the 101st Airborne Division air-assaulted into positions north and west of Hue on February 2 to attack the three additional NVA regiments and the 3,000 local forces who were holding a corridor into Hue and supporting the two NVA regiments already inside the city.

NVA battalions were trying to hold a ring around the city and move reinforcements into it by creeping unseen down the canals that surrounded the Citadel. In this they were aided by heavy rains and fog, which made American artillery, air strikes, and the 8-inch guns of Navy cruisers in the Gulf of Tonkin harder to target. The Citadel's western wall was the vital link. Everything the communists consumed—troops, ammo, medicine, and rations—flowed through it. US forces, checked by foul weather, low ceilings, and visibility of 500 feet or less, fought to close that route. For ten miserable days, four American battalions pressed down from the northwest toward that wall, the NVA defending their key supply lines—Route 554 and the Perfume River itself—with mortars, machine guns, RPGs, and 122 mm rockets.[30]

MACV documents spoke of "the weather greatly limiting supporting fires," but those fires were still prodigious: 7,700 rounds of 8-inch shell, 53,000 rounds of 105 mm artillery, and 200 tons of aerial bombs and napalm. By February 22, the Cav and Airborne had closed to within a mile of the wall. Two days later, they reached the wall itself. Sixty-eight Americans had been killed and 453 wounded in the effort to cut this main supply line and chew up the battalions defending it. In the course of their advance, they counted 400 enemy dead in collapsed bunkers and trenches. The NVA units, MACV noted, were secure only "when they walked through jungles, and avoided the population." That advantage disappeared everywhere they deployed in Tet, especially in Hue. "As soon as he moved, we did also," MACV observed.[31]

Undeterred by the ARVN, which lacked heavy direct-fire weapons to blast the communists out of their hardened positions, the two NVA regiments inside Hue embarked on a bloody purge of what the VC called "the enemy's restrictive administrative machinery." The political cadres embedded in the combat units had lists and photos of South Vietnamese citizens to be "eliminated" and were given more names by some of the students, teachers, and Buddhist monks who welcomed the invaders. To make the purge more palatable, the communists stood up a "Coalition Front for Peace." This was the usual communist front organization that was entirely supine: two Viet Cong, a Buddhist monk, a professor, and sixty-year-old Mrs. Luan Chi.[32]

The purges were carried out inside Hue but also in its outer districts, the "kill lists" vetted by NVA and VC officers. In just two of the outer districts, the communists killed over 2,000 "puppet authorities," who were legislators, policemen, army officers on leave, hamlet and village chiefs, civil servants, clergy, professionals, or just merchants or landowners indicted as "tyrants, reactionaries, and spies." The corpses of two Benedictine priests from France were found, one bound hand and foot and buried alive, the other shot in the back of the head.

The NVA, guided by their "coalition front" in Hue and by snitches in the occupied outlying districts, killed about 6,000 South Vietnamese citizens. The victims of the communist purge were later discovered in mass graves on both banks of the Perfume River. Many had been shot; others had been clubbed to death or buried alive. During and after the atrocity, the

communists were unrepentant: "The entire control machinery of the feu-
dalists and bourgeois was centered in Hue," they alleged. The proletariat
had risen up to kill its masters, they lied. "Hatred and vengeance prevailed
everywhere, in the hearts of children and old people alike."[33]

For the first several days, Hue's defenders were handcuffed by rules
of engagement that banned "supporting fires" in a city that was notorious
for its culture of political resistance to Saigon. "The invaders," a witness
reported, "were all over the area, walking back and forth through the streets
with leafy camouflage hanging from their shoulder packs, carrying mor-
tar tubes and projectiles, machine guns, and other weapons." They seemed
untroubled by thoughts of a counterattack. The restrictions were finally
removed on February 3, when two US Marine battalions, which had been
rushed up from Phu Bai as a reaction force on January 31, began fighting
house-to-house to take back the New City.[34]

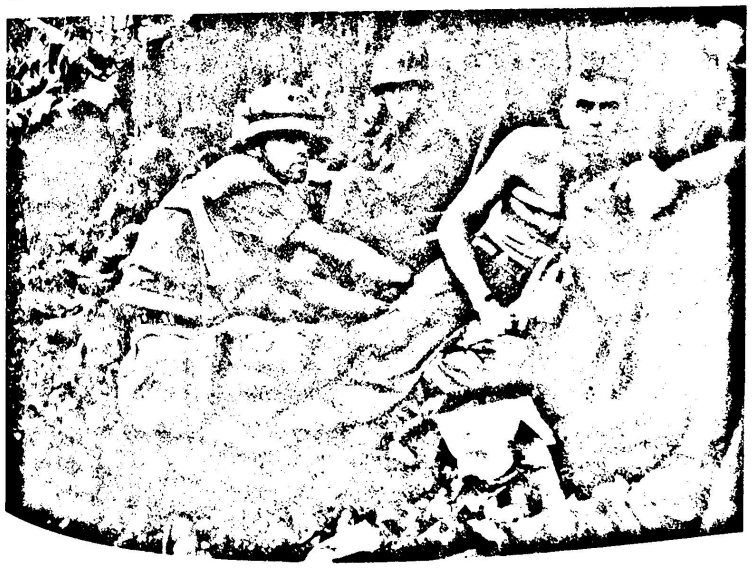
Michael Herr, who was there for *Esquire*, recalled the drive into Hue
from Phu Bai in an eight-truck convoy, refugees lining the sides of the
road: "All the grunts were whistling, and no two were whistling the same
tune; it sounded like a locker room before a game that nobody wanted to
play." The fighting in the New City sloshed back and forth, Marine bat-
talions measuring their AOs not in square miles but in city blocks. They
learned urban warfare quickly, avoiding the streets and closing on the
enemy by blasting through the walls of houses until they arrived inside
the enemy strongpoints. They took and held the Hue University campus.
Based there, they undertook six major assaults on enemy troops in the
Treasury and Post Office buildings. Half of the New City was reduced to
rubble.[35]

The US determination to recover Hue reflected high-level meetings in
Washington, where administration officials worried that the NVA needed
only *one* major city. If they held Hue, they could call it the "first liberated
zone" and the "true capital" of South Vietnam. It would become a magnet
for antiwar South Vietnamese "coalitionists." Clark Clifford urged Johnson
to drop bombs into the "restricted areas" around Hanoi and the Chinese
border to make clear that the United States would not be pushed around
in this way. Hanoi was not taking up the president's peace feelers, Clifford
argued, so Johnson should hit them *harder*. But Johnson squirmed away
from the decision. Too many planes and pilots would be lost to the North
Vietnamese air defenses, LBJ countered. "Bob McNamara says the loss is
not worth the gain."

General Earle "Bus" Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, urged
the president to "stop applying rigid restrictions to ourselves" and to coun-
terpunch brutally before it was too late. On February 8, Wheeler wrote
Westmoreland: "There is a theory that overall enemy strategy is to attack
and attrite the ARVN and thereby destroy them and ultimately gain accep-
tance by the people of a coalition government that would request the with-
drawal of U.S. forces in South Vietnam." In meetings with the president,
Bus Wheeler spoke not of theory but of fact. Reinforcements were urgently
needed to "contain the enemy offensive" in I Corps.[36]

On February 12, the 1st Battalion of the 5th US Marine Regiment and
two South Vietnamese Marine battalions relieved the ARVN Airborne
troops inside the Citadel. Using the critical LCU ramp, the Marines brought
in five M-48 tanks and four M-50 Ontos tank destroyers, the latter a lightly
armored tracked vehicle mounting six 106 mm recoilless rifles. The two
South Vietnamese Marine battalions arrived with five 105 mm howitzers,

Men of the 5th Marine Regiment during the combat in Hue City. Inside the Citadel, the Marines lost one killed or wounded for every yard gained. (National Archives)



which finally gave them the firepower to dislodge the small, scattered enemy detachments that were holding up whole companies of ARVN infantry.

The fighting inside the Citadel intensified. The troops fought house-to-house, the US forces suffering one killed or wounded for every yard gained. The US Marines were held up inside the northeast wall of the Citadel, their advance checked by enemy fire from the palace grounds on their right flank, which, for "political and cultural" reasons, they were forbidden to suppress.

Here and there shivering refugees would appear from a cellar or through a gap in a wall to try to reach their abandoned homes. The Marines would shoo them away: "Di, di, *di*, you sorry-ass motherfuckers, go on, get the hell away from here!" The refugees would smile, bow or shrug, and dash up the ruined streets. Three companies of the 1st Battalion of the 5th Marines were reduced to below platoon strength. By now, Michael Herr observed, "every one wanted to get wounded," just to get out alive. On February 16, radio intercepts revealed that the NVA officer commanding the force inside the Citadel had been killed by artillery. His deputy commander requested permission to withdraw, as the soldiers could no longer be supplied. American artillery, air, and naval fires were making all movement through the western wall impossible. His request was denied, and he was ordered to "defend in place"—to the last man.[38]

On that same day, scenting victory, Vice President Ky, Prime Minister Nguyen Van Loc, ARVN I Corps commander General Hoang Xuan Lam, and a dozen other South Vietnamese grandees flew to MACV's Forward HQ in I Corps to show themselves to a gaggle of reporters before being briefed on the recapture of the Imperial City. Westy's deputy, Creighton Abrams, was there, along with the Marine commander Robert Cushman. They briefed Ky and the others on the fighting, and spoke of the "cultural" constraints posed by an enemy fighting from pagodas, palaces, churches, schools, and hospitals. By now, 150 of the 160 historic structures inside the Hue Citadel were smoking ruins. Ky, who had declared war on Hue two years earlier when its garrison commander had challenged his rule, assured the gathered generals that they were free to raze everything that remained standing: "I will take responsibility for damage or destruction if necessary to drive the enemy from the city."[39]

On February 21, the ARVN 1st Division was finally relieved by the Cav, which broke through enemy positions on the western and northern faces of the Citadel. The communists by now had been pressed into the southeastern corner of the Citadel. All hope of resupply and reinforcement was ended. The 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division had deployed on the southern outskirts of Hue to close those routes, and the Cav had stopped all movement in and out of Hue from the north and west.

None of it had been easy. Those Army units took two-thirds as many casualties in five days as the Marines had suffered in three weeks. On February 23, a battalion of the ARVN 1st Division as well as the division's crack reaction force—known as the Black Panther or Hac Bao Company—seized the flag tower on the southern wall of the Citadel. They fired 300 rounds of 105 mm artillery into the wall to kill the defenders there before fighting their way up the steps of the flag tower, the surviving NVA retreating before them, triggering claymore mines and defending barricades to the last man.[40]

Early on February 24, ARVN troops tore down the fifty-foot-wide VC flag that had fluttered over the Citadel for more than three weeks. They raised the red-striped yellow flag of South Vietnam in its place. President Thieu, a former ARVN 1st Division commander, arrived the next day to congratulate the division's current commander, General Ngo Quang Truong, on his successful defense of the city. Mopping up communist stragglers would continue for another week, but Operation Hue City was effectively over. The battle ended on March 2, with 70 percent of the city destroyed or badly damaged. Enemy casualties were estimated at 5,000 killed and 100 captured. The ARVN and South Vietnamese Marines lost 384 killed and 1,830 wounded. The US Marines lost 142 killed and 857 wounded, the Army 74 killed and 507 wounded. Both sides were chastened by the result here and elsewhere. Le Duan's general offensive had shattered against superior allied mobility and firepower, failing to ignite a general uprising, or any uprising at all. But the American and South Vietnamese success had to be netted against the tremendous damage done to South Vietnam, high casualties, a collapse of the pacification program, and the psychological blow of the offensive to American hopes and plans.[41]

Chapter 14

"WE CAN KEEP ON WINNING THE WAR FOREVER"

The Tet Offensive ripped visible gashes all across South Vietnam. It did equal, less visible harm to the South Vietnamese government. General Le Nguyen Khang, the III Corps commander and a Ky protégé, told the CIA in February 1968 that Thieu had shown himself to be a weak and uninspiring leader, and that Ky was no better. Still, Khang added, there was no appetite for a coup among senior military officers. No one wanted responsibility for the mess in South Vietnam. The only thing all of the generals could agree on was that, like Thieu and Ky, they would never permit the VC to join a South Vietnamese coalition government. Above all, the generals were survivors, and they knew that they would not retain their posts under a power-sharing deal with the communists. France's puppet emperor Bao Dai had tried that twenty-three years earlier, and he had lasted only five months on the throne before being brushed aside by his Viet Minh coalition partners. "I have no solution to the leadership problem," Khang confided to the CIA, "and I doubt anyone else has one."[1]

With so much defeatism swirling around him, Westmoreland could see that his war in Vietnam was running out of time and gas. President Johnson froze in panic, woodenly insisting that, although critics

abounded, "our military and diplomatic men in the field know more than any of our congressmen and senators back here." And yet when the military men wanted to start bombing Hanoi and Haiphong to punish Hanoi's aggression and war crimes inside South Vietnam, Johnson authorized just fourteen targets, hardly enough to sway the politburo.

On February 18, 1968, the president flew to California to appear on the flight deck of the carrier *Constellation* to address the crew before they sailed for Vietnam. LBJ dripped fear and indecision. He asked for questions, and none were asked, so he called on the gathered sailors. "If you were president," he asked one, "what would *you* do to change things?" "Hit them more," the young man replied. Johnson then launched into a tortured explanation as to why he couldn't. It was impossible, he insisted, to close all of their roads and sea lanes. And the Russians and Chinese might intervene if he did: "The whole family might jump on us."[2]

LBJ was trying to kick the war away to reduce its impact on his reelection chances. That was more difficult now than earlier, for the press corps in Saigon had nearly doubled in size during Tet. There had been 350 reporters in Saigon when the offensive began. There were now 650. With the media filled with news of Tet and its casualties, the president's approval rating sank to 32 percent.

LBJ's meetings in February and March 1968 rang with indignant denunciations of the press and Bill Fulbright's Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "People have the view that we took a great defeat," the president grumbled. "*Our* version is not being put to the American people properly." Yet MACV's lawyerly assertion that Tet had resulted in "favorable operational statistics for the quarter" charmed no one.

Clark Clifford, who was poised to replace McNamara as secretary of defense, pointed to the contradiction in the Army's position: "On the one hand the military has said we had quite a victory out there last week. On the other hand, they now say that it was such a big victory that we need 120,000 *more* men." This was a reference to Westmoreland's plea for reinforcements during the Tet Offensive.

McGeorge Bundy, once an ardent booster of the war, had fled the administration. McNamara, voice of so much rah-rah optimism, was in his last, thoroughly dispirited month on the job. President Johnson, abandoned by his most trusted hawks, was stricken with fear and doubt. The CIA director, Dick Helms, told him that the best that could be expected from the great bloodletting of Tet was more stagnation, "neither side capable of registering decisive gains." For the moment, LBJ held the line against Westmoreland's call for more troops. There would be "no great new overall moves" in the war, the president assured a press conference. The manpower ceiling would be kept at 525,000. Up for reelection in nine months, the president dared not raise it again.[3]

But Westmoreland wanted to counterpunch. He wrote directly to LBJ on February 12. The heavy communist casualties, Westy argued, "afforded near and long-term opportunities" to pursue and destroy the wounded enemy. Until now, the United States had waged "a limited war with limited objectives, fought with limited means, programmed for the utilization of limited resources." It was time to go all in to win with "a bold offensive campaign."[4]

Westmoreland had inflicted enormous casualties on the enemy during Tet and now wanted to implement the new strategy he had floated during the summer of 1967. He told the president the bold outlines—"the enemy has changed his strategy, we must change ours"—but he kept the rather alarming details to himself and the Joint Chiefs. Westy wanted to increase troop levels and take the offensive north across the DMZ and west into the sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia, to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail and isolate the South Vietnamese battlefield.

Three weeks before Tet, Westmoreland had ordered his staff to work up Operation El Paso. El Paso would harden Route 9 across I Corps, through Khe Sanh, and into the Laotian road and trail junction of Xepon. With that line of supply complete and secured by US Marines, Westy planned to strike to Xepon with the Cav, the 101st Airborne Division, and the ARVN Airborne Division to seize that "critical choke point" before retiring down the Ho Chi Minh trail to Kontum City in the Central Highlands, destroying enemy troops and supply caches as he went.[5]

Westmoreland planned to pair El Paso with Operation Pacific Grove, an amphibious feint with Okinawa-based Marines toward the North Vietnamese city of Vinh. He assumed that the feint toward Vinh, 150 miles north of the DMZ, would pin down North Vietnamese reserve forces and make it safer for the Cav and Airborne to operate in Laos. For these operations, he renewed his plea for 206,000 additional troops, which would have breached

the already strained ceiling of 525,000 US troops in South Vietnam that had been agreed in July 1967.

Westmoreland reckoned that he would get his wish list this time. Even if President Johnson lost the 1968 race, his successor almost certainly would want a war-winning strategy. McNamara was leaving and Clark Clifford was taking over at the Pentagon to run the war. Clifford had been hawkish on Vietnam. And, oddly, polls favored Westy at this point. True, there had been a rally of 100,000 against the war in Washington in October 1967, and antiwar demonstrations spread to a growing number of American colleges in 1967 and 1968. But 60 percent of Americans still opposed the protests.

When polled about strategy in December 1967, a plurality of Americans had called for a more *aggressive* prosecution of the war. Asked whether America should invade North Vietnam with troops, 49 percent had said yes, 29 percent had said no, and 22 percent were unsure. Forty-seven percent had approved occupying the DMZ, with only 21 percent opposed. Forty-two percent of Americans had supported mining Haiphong harbor, even at the risk of sinking Soviet ships. Only 33 percent opposed the risky measure. This was soft support for escalation, but support nonetheless.[6]

And yet Westmoreland and the chiefs, fearful of LBJ's temper and moods, once again failed to specify what they *really* wanted. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Earle Wheeler, had been thoroughly cowed by the president. These days he entered the White House, a witness observed, like "a wary beagle, his soft dark eyes watchful for the origin of the next blow." What followed, in February and March 1968, was a deliberate and ultimately self-defeating program of deception by Wheeler, Westmoreland, and the Joint Chiefs.[7]

Already on February 8, four days after Westmoreland had assured Wheeler that the communists had been soundly defeated and lacked "a basic capability to sustain attacks" anywhere in South Vietnam, Wheeler instructed Westmoreland to go ahead and request reinforcements anyway because "the U.S. is not prepared to accept defeat in Vietnam." Westy read between the lines and understood what Wheeler was up to: scaring the president into sending more troops. Westmoreland obediently went along with the ruse. Right you are, he replied to Wheeler. "It's only prudent to plan for the worst contingency, in which I will need more troops."[8]

Wheeler, knowing that Westy wanted the troops to enable a new offensive strategy in Southeast Asia, did not dare say as much to the president, who wanted the war to end, not widen. Nor were Wheeler's and Westy's interests aligned. Westmoreland wanted the troops to win in Vietnam. Wheeler wanted to use the troop request to pressure the White House into finally calling up the reserves so that he could begin to fill the US military's personnel shortages all over the world.[9]

Bureaucratically, Wheeler had high hopes for 1968. McNamara, who had held the Joint Chiefs on a short leash for three years, was departing and being replaced by Clark Clifford. The chiefs assumed that Clifford would be an ally—"a tabula rasa," as one analyst put it, "on which to write their plan." He wasn't. In mid-February, as SecDef designee, Clifford made his revised position on the war crystal clear: "The idea of a U.S. military victory in Vietnam is a dangerous illusion because both the Soviets and the Chinese have the capacity to preclude it—probably by supply operations alone, but if necessary by intervening with their own forces."[10]

In 1968, Wheeler and Clifford were looking at overlapping crises everywhere: in South Vietnam, to be sure, but also a Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, China's successful test of a thermonuclear bomb, North Korea's seizure of the USS *Pueblo* spy ship and attack on the South Korean presidential palace, continuing conflict between American and Soviet proxies in the Middle East, and the communist Pathet Lao's rout of US-backed Royal Laotian forces, effectively handing that critical nation to the communists—the worst possible prelude to Westy's proposed incursion into Laos.[11]

Pentagon planners tasked with responding to these emergencies reported that, due to the nonstop demands of Vietnam and the dwindling strategic reserve, they had sufficient forces and funds to cope with none but the most trivial. LBJ's dogged refusal to call up even a fraction of America's 1 million reserve forces exacerbated this "manpower crisis of 1968."[12]

Asking an already spooked LBJ to double down on Vietnam, abandon the policy of gradual escalation, call up 120,000 reserves, and lift the ban on ground operations in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—which might finally trigger Soviet or Chinese intervention in the war—seemed obtuse in an atmosphere in which inflation and deficits were rising and nearly every US Army unit in the United States, Europe, and Korea was judged

"not combat ready" owing to diversions of men, vehicles, and munitions to Vietnam.[13]

Clark Clifford saw nothing but disaster in a larger war because it would merely apply Westy's attrition methods to a bigger theater, creating massive additional liabilities and casualties in the process. As it was, President Johnson was close to despair. "What makes the North Vietnamese fight so well, with so much more determination than the South Vietnamese," he blurted out in a meeting of his senior advisers. The South Korean government was threatening to withdraw its 50,000 troops from South Vietnam to cope with Kim Il Sung's threats along Korea's 38th parallel, and Johnson had no troops (or willing allies) to replace them. Now here was General Westmoreland requesting more troops, "shock action," and a "more dynamic strategy" at a time when honest analysis of Tet revealed that, far from being a victory and a launchpad for more aggressive operations, Tet might have been an American *defeat*.[14]

Tactically, Tet *seemed* at first blush to have spelled disaster for the communists. But really, the communists suffered less from Tet than Westmoreland alleged. Initial MACV accounts spoke of a VC that was effectively destroyed during Tet. In January and February, MACV put communist losses at 45,000 killed and 5,800 captured. That was 20 percent of their total strength if you used MACV's pre-Tet estimate, but only 10 percent if you used CIA numbers.

CIA analysts now argued that the victory was not nearly as decisive as it appeared. They noted that 58,000 communist main and local forces had been fed into battle in the two weeks of fighting that ebbed on February 13, 1968. That was about 50 percent of their regular forces inside South Vietnam, and if you assumed, as MACV seemed to be doing, that most of the communist KIAs and prisoners during Tet were NVA and VC main-force troops, then they should have been devastated, with a casualty rate of 88 percent.[15]

But that, the CIA argued in February 1968, was nonsense. Many of the enemy casualties were not trained, seasoned regular troops. They were local-force guerrillas, peasants drafted to move VC supplies, new recruits, or civilians killed in populated areas taken under attack. The CIA concluded that the VC/NVA losses were "high, but not as serious as first believed." And the enemy, who had flooded the countryside during the offensive, was accelerating recruiting in those rural areas that had not so much been "liberated" by the enemy as abandoned by their own security forces.

After Tet, the NVA continued to infiltrate 14,000 troops every month, and the VC continued to recruit 7,000 new fighters every month. Setting infiltration and recruitment against Tet casualties, the net communist loss was probably closer to 29,000 men, which was far from backbreaking. "In sum," the CIA concluded, "communist losses were high, but not as serious as first believed."[16]

Strategically, Tet paid enormous dividends to Hanoi and the Viet Cong. Free-world forces had been attacking the communists and reporting huge body counts every year since 1965. Westmoreland had assured the American public in 1967 that the enemy was nearly broken. And yet Tet brought the heaviest fighting of the war for the Americans—a massive upsurge, not the last gasp mooted by Westy.

American casualties in 1968—17,000 killed and 87,000 wounded—increased the dismay. In 1966, only about 1.5 percent of American wounded were dying of their injuries. With the communists using more potent weapons and tactics, that ratio had climbed to 19 percent, making the number of Americans wounded as "political" as the number of KIAs.

Lulled by MACV's prediction of imminent victory, the shocking attack on South Vietnam's cities had, in the words of the US embassy, "stunned and confused" the South Vietnamese (to say nothing of the Americans watching on their televisions at home). South Vietnam's city dwellers had believed themselves safe. They had always thought of the war as a rural one. Suddenly they were confronted with urban combat, death and destruction, water and power cuts, housing and food crises, and mobs of refugees. As MACV put it: "The VC got into the towns as they said they would." And now everyone believed they could do it *again*.[17]

This psychological victory had knock-on effects. The VC, MACV warned, could continue "to force a non-committed attitude on the people, to oppose every government call for 'unity of effort' and 'national purpose.'" General Fred Weyand's staff, which monitored the intense VC activity in III Corps and Saigon, concluded that "the most clear-cut gain of the VC" from Tet was the success of this "strategic terrorism." They had made even the safest areas feel dangerous.

"Everywhere," Weyand's operations chief wrote, "there is fear of the VC now." Supporting the Saigon regime had become a life-threatening choice. The VC followed Tet with a very deliberate program of terrorism, assassinations, and kidnappings to ram home the point that neither the Americans nor the Thieu government could protect the South Vietnamese people. Every week, all over South Vietnam after Tet, an average of 85 civilians were assassinated, 160 wounded, and 250 abducted, causing the US embassy in Saigon to begin tracking yet another implacable statistic: "Weekly Terror Activity." How would the Saigon government ever get *this* scourge under control?[18]

How indeed? South Vietnam was thrown into chaos and confusion by the Tet Offensive, which destroyed towns, halted business activity, drove up prices, and generated refugees on an enormous, destabilizing scale. After the offensive, CORDS analysts discovered that Westy's ops in 1967 and the communist attacks in 1968 had created at least 1.5 million new refugees—meaning that one of every eleven South Vietnamese was now a displaced person.

The destroyed towns and villages were all the more problematic because they were largely destroyed by American and ARVN fire. "The strafing of populated areas," an ARVN officer told the CIA, "must cease. *We* are killing more innocent civilians than the VC." In I Corps, most of Hue was destroyed, 4,000 civilians were killed, and 90,000 of the region's population were made refugees. In II Corps, all of the major towns were destroyed. An American soldier who went into Pleiku after the VC withdrew wrote that "the destruction was staggering," everything burnt and pulverized, "like Berlin or London after the bombings of World War II." John Paul Vann, now a civilian CORDS adviser in II Corps, noted the irony that "the battles we win may add up to losing the war" for "the destruction exceeds our capability for recovery."[19]

In III Corps, the losses were most severe in Saigon, where 17,000 civilians were killed and wounded and 19,000 houses were destroyed, creating 206,000 new refugees. Before Tet, there had been only 14,000 refugees in IV Corps' Mekong Delta. Now there were 170,000. The Revolutionary Development and New Life pacification programs, designed to bring secure housing, healthcare, and education to rural areas, were halted and thrown backward by the Tet Offensive. Teachers and social workers were killed, kidnapped, or driven away. Youth groups and ruff-puff forces were penetrated by the VC, during and after the offensive, and could no longer be considered reliable.[20]

The scale of the Tet destruction all across South Vietnam was so great and demoralizing that President Thieu had announced Operation Recovery on February 4, before the smoke had even cleared on the battlefields and while combat was still raging in Hue and Saigon. It was a $400 million program to repair the estimated $1.4 billion of damage done by the communist attacks on the cities and towns. Even on such a reduced scale, none of it went smoothly. A US adviser was appalled by the inefficiency. "The Tet disaster," he wrote, "produced classic examples of the 'I-have-to-ask-Saigon' syndrome." There were thousands of problems to solve everywhere you looked, yet no one dared solve them. Local officials and officers had been trained that "authority comes from Saigon and so do all decisions." American advisers noted that South Vietnamese military and civilian organizations functioned neither horizontally nor even vertically: "It was difficult to determine which government official was in charge of what section, and what problems he was to solve."[21]

The buck never stopped. It just turned in demoralizing circles, a problem made worse by a prolonged breakdown in the mail and phone systems. Even teams from Saigon's Ministry of Social Welfare, dispatched to aid the refugees, refused to do anything for them without "specific and unambiguous instructions." There was no sanitation, medical care, education, recreation, or even food and water distribution in squalid camps that were increasingly run by gangs. The government assured its citizens that despite the late and stumbling start, all Operation Recovery claims would be settled by May 1968. By May, only one-third of the claims had been funded.[22]

Overall, the communist Tet Offensive and the allied reaction had killed or wounded 32,000 South Vietnamese civilians, destroyed 200,000 homes, and made 627,000 homeless. A fragile South Vietnam, its military reduced by 3,000 casualties in the fighting, had been made even more fragile, the VC occupying 205 more South Vietnamese hamlets after Tet than they had controlled before it. Saigon would have to claw those places back, fight the war, upgrade its military, and rebuild its shattered infrastructure and

society—all at the same time, and at a moment when American patience with the war and its costs was near the breaking point.[23]

To the American people, who sat in judgment of this distant and futile war, the scale and fury of the fighting in every corner of Vietnam made clear that Westmoreland's boast that the corner had been turned in the war—a boast he almost certainly had not believed even as he uttered it—was yet another irresponsible lie. "We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders, both in Vietnam and in Washington, to have any faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds," CBS *Evening News* anchor Walter Cronkite told his nearly 30 million viewers on February 27. Watching the broadcast in the White House, LBJ groaned: "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost the country."[24]

He certainly had. Nineteen sixty-eight would be the crossover point in polling on Vietnam—the first year in which a majority of Americans called the war a "mistake." Three hundred and forty-six Americans had been killed and nearly 2,000 wounded repulsing the Tet attacks. Cronkite, who

CBS Evening News anchor Walter Cronkite in Hue City during the fighting there. MACV and the president, Cronkite observed, "are finding silver linings in the darkest clouds." For LBJ, this was the end: "If I've lost Cronkite," he groaned, "I've lost the country." (National Archives)

roved from Saigon to Hue, challenged the MACV line that the Americans had won the battle, observing that it was far from clear "who won and who lost in the great Tet Offensive for the cities."[25]

But even if the Americans and ARVN were credited with victory, what exactly had they won? The American people had now been at war in Vietnam for longer than they had fought in World War II, and for what seemed to all of them much smaller stakes. Cronkite expressed the rising sense of futility: "It now seems more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in stalemate." Even the conservative *Wall Street Journal* despaired: "Get ready to accept that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed."[26]

It was against this gloomy backdrop that Westmoreland continued to nurse his fantasy that the United States was winning and that he just needed one more massive troop surge to deliver victory. Earle Wheeler, who had tried and failed to interest the president in a 500,000-man expansion of the US military to handle Vietnam and all other contingencies, flew out to Saigon on February 23 to meet with Westmoreland and coordinate their approach to the president.

Westy argued that it was essential "to give a highly-visible manifestation of the nation's resolve" that would shock Hanoi into major concessions. But Wheeler didn't dare go there, knowing that the last thing LBJ wanted on the eve of the presidential election was a "highly visible" reminder of the sacrifices demanded by the war in Vietnam. In White House meetings in the second week of February, LBJ had studied every option to increase combat power—mobilize reserves, enlarge the draft calls, lengthen the twelve-month combat tour, or send Vietnam veterans back for a second tour. He had rejected them all as political poison.[27]

In their Saigon meetings two weeks later, Wheeler and Westmoreland agreed on some fibs to tell the president to galvanize him. It was a perfect example, as one analyst put it, "of that mysterious inner odds-making process by which Southeast Asia policy decisions were reached in the Johnson Administration." The two Army generals would warn the president that 206,000 additional troops were needed—not for new offensive operations but as "emergency reinforcements" to avert collapse. "Why argue strategy *then*," Wheeler later rationalized. "Why argue *that* far down the line?" First, he argued, "get the capability." Troops, not strategy, were "the stronger talking point."[28]

Wheeler cabled the president from Saigon on February 26 and falsely asserted that Westmoreland had a "paper-thin margin" after Tet and was barely hanging on. Westy urgently needed reinforcements. LBJ's advisers met to discuss the cable the next day. President Johnson was worried: "I don't like what I'm smelling from those cables from Vietnam." He worried about an American defeat on the eve of elections. "I don't want them to ask for something," the president fretted to his advisers, "not get it, and then place all the blame on *me*." But LBJ had to fear his own defeat in the elections if he assented to Westy's request and increased US forces in Vietnam to 675,000 troops.[29]

Nearly all of his advisers agreed that a new troop surge would further Americanize a war that was already too Americanized. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach called the proposed surge "pounding troops down the rathole." First, Katzenbach advised, it was important to ask, "What is our *purpose*? What is *achievable*?" These were the two crucial questions that Wheeler and Westy were deliberately avoiding. White House counsel Harry McPherson called the surge plan "unbelievable and futile." McNamara, now in his last week on the job, also argued against Wheeler and Westmoreland. They were asking for too much, he said. In order to deploy 206,000 additional troops to Vietnam, the SecDef explained, the Pentagon would have to increase active-duty strength by 400,000, pull troops from Europe, activate 150,000 reserves, increase draft calls, extend tours for six months, expand production of aircraft, artillery, ordnance, and vehicles, and bust through congressionally authorized "manning levels." At a minimum, McNamara estimated, such a surge would cost an additional $28 billion. The correct number of reinforcements for Vietnam, the SecDef concluded, "is zero."[30]

Wheeler flew back to Washington to brief LBJ on his meetings with Westmoreland and warned the president on February 28 that the damage of Tet had been so severe that more troops really *were* needed just to avoid setbacks. Without them, he cautioned the president, the ARVN would collapse, and allied forces would have to abandon Hue and Quang Tri City to the communists. Elsewhere, the NVA and VC would be free to undo all of the progress of the past three years. They would overrun Khe Sanh and the DMZ. They would take the Central Highlands and the Mekong Delta, and they would attack Saigon again, "and indeed anywhere where the conditions are favorable."

Westmoreland, of course, had privately assured Wheeler that defeat had already been averted and that the surge forces were needed not to hold the line but to widen the war and win. Wheeler's real interest was not Vietnam. He wanted to add US troops around the world to plus-up theater commanders and restore the nation's strategic reserve to its pre–July 1965 level. Westy tagged along obediently, displaying passive-aggressiveness even in his metaphors: "I stayed within the ballpark, but I played it right up to the fence." On one of Wheeler's letters, Westy scribbled in the margin: "Wheeler knew that I knew what was available, but Wheeler wanted a substantial reserve for worldwide use.... I wanted a 'bank' of reserves from which to draw." Westmoreland applauded Wheeler's "bureaucratic tactics" and the chairman's skill as "a soldier and a diplomat."[31]

He shouldn't have. Bus Wheeler did his job too well. He cast the war and the aftermath of Tet in such a gloomy light that LBJ—whose approval rating was sinking below 30 percent, the lowest of his presidency—turned to the incoming defense secretary, Clark Clifford, and instructed him not to fulfill the troop request but instead to undertake an across-the-board review of Vietnam strategy. Whatever Clifford decided would be law. A titan of the Democratic Party for twenty years, Clifford had organized Truman's upset victory in 1948, had overseen the Kennedy transition, and was old, wealthy, and confident enough to be immune to LBJ's groupthink.[32]

The media had all but declared war on the administration. NBC, for example, frankly admitted that its war coverage was unrelentingly negative not because America was losing but because "Tet was already established in the public's mind as a defeat," and so the network gave the viewers what they wanted. *Washington Post* satirist Art Buchwald, whose syndicated column appeared in over 500 newspapers around the country, played to this growing antiwar audience, publishing an "exclusive interview with General Custer at the Little Big Horn" in February. "We've turned the corner and can see light at the end of the tunnel," Buchwald's Custer barked. "We have the Sioux on the run."[33]

This mockery and malice gnawed at LBJ. Clark Clifford recalled that at a breakfast meeting with Bus Wheeler, "President Johnson was as worried as I have ever seen him." The president displayed far more strategic sense than the chiefs at the meeting, directing Clifford to give him recommendations by March 4 that would answer the critical questions raised by the

war: What specific goals would surge forces achieve? How would the communists react to the surge? How would Congress and the American public react to further escalation?[34]

Clark Clifford's fast, caffeine-fueled review scrutinized all of America's largely wasted effort and expenditure. Clifford was advised by his two principal deputies, Paul Nitze and Paul Warnke. The sixty-one-year-old Nitze, deputy secretary of defense and the number-two man at the Pentagon, argued that the war had to be sharply curtailed and fought on a reduced-cost basis because of the "interrelationship between U.S. Vietnam strategy and global objectives." It was high time, Nitze said, to shift resources from the "bottomless pit" of Vietnam to more important missions elsewhere. As things stood, Nitze concluded, America was "paying too much for a single foreign policy objective." The war in Vietnam had pushed the American defense budget to 10 percent of GDP—an unsustainable level. To dead-enders such as Max Taylor, who wanted to add more ground troops and increase bombing after Tet, Warnke snapped: "We can't slug them any more than we have already done—and we didn't break their will before; why should we be able to break it now?"[35]

Assistant Secretary of Defense Warnke headed the Pentagon's "Little State Department"—the Office of International Security Affairs. That was John McNaughton's old post, vacated when McNamara's closest adviser had been killed along with his wife and twelve-year-old son in a Piedmont Airlines crash in July 1967. For Clifford's review, Warnke's shop evaluated Westmoreland's search and destroy operations and posited some "alternative strategies."[36]

Warnke agreed with Nitze, attacking the "misconception that Southeast Asia [is] an arena of superpower confrontation." In fact, the forty-eight-year-old Warnke said, Vietnam had only marginal importance to the Soviet Union, and its importance to the United States was no greater. As for the panacea of bombing North Vietnam, Warnke called it "irrational." Rolling Thunder air strikes, Warnke argued, "are infinitely more costly to us than to the North Vietnamese." To blunt Rolling Thunder, Hanoi had added a high-performance air force, early-warning radars, SAMs, and radar-directed antiaircraft guns. They had exacted a heavy toll, downing 950 American aircraft with more than 1,000 pilots and aircrew. The price of these trained men and aircraft plus the million tons of bombs strewn across North Vietnam far exceeded the value of North Vietnamese facilities destroyed, and this was not even accounting for the "self-defeating" damage to America's image around the world caused by North Vietnam's civilian casualties from American bombing, which averaged more than 1,000 every month.[37]

Warnke recalled that in the fall of 1967, McNamara had asked him to project where the United States would be in Vietnam in one year's time. "My general conclusion," Warnke later told an interviewer, "was that a year later we would be exactly where we were then, except that another 10,000 Americans would have been killed. I turned out to be wrong. There were another *14,000* Americans killed."

Warnke judged the American war in Vietnam "unlosable"—so long as US forces remained—but, he asked, what end was served by the sacrifice if Saigon could never stand on its own? "We can keep on winning the war forever... and it won't ever make any difference... because there is no way in which we can bring about political progress in South Vietnam." Tet, Warnke said, "exposed that what we had thought was political progress was just so thin as to be illusory."[38]

For "alternative strategies," Warnke's office urged the rapid "Vietnamization" of the war. The North Vietnamese still had plenty of manpower and will, so the war might go on forever for Americans unless they disengaged. US forces should serve as a "mobile shield" around the main population centers only until the war could be handed off to a more confident and competent ARVN. In the meantime, American forces should abandon search and destroy in the border regions, cede that empty space to the enemy, and pull back to guard the more important border—"the demographic frontier" of the big cities and the densely populated coastal plain.

On March 1, Nitze handed Clifford a detailed memo formed from frank conversations like these. It argued for a radical overhaul of LBJ's Vietnam strategy. Victory was impossible. Now was the time to seek a nonmilitary solution. Search and destroy operations should be wound down, America's profile in Vietnam lowered. More responsibility had to be given to the South Vietnamese government and armed forces, and the bombing of North Vietnam should be halted. The San Antonio Formula—a bombing halt in exchange for peace talks—should be swiftly implemented as part of a new "reduced-cost strategy." Westmoreland should be given no more than

50,000 additional troops—and those only to buy time for the "South Vietnamese to pick themselves up."[39]

Bombing, the preferred American way of war in the twentieth century, was losing support even among senators afraid of seeming soft on communism. It just didn't seem to work. Bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail never hobbled the NVA and VC in South Vietnam because they subsisted on a mere 20 tons of supplies a day, not the 20,000 tons required each day by American forces. North Vietnamese air defenses had become almost invincible in the three years since Rolling Thunder began. A country defended by just 700 flak guns in 1965 now had 8,000 antiaircraft guns, 400 radar systems, 150 fighter aircraft, and 40 SAM sites.[40]

Nitze and Warnke had already pointed to the cost-ineffectiveness of Rolling Thunder—that the bombs, aircraft, and aircrews expended cost far more than the damage inflicted on the ground. Now Democratic senators like William Proxmire of Wisconsin and George McGovern of South Dakota pressured the White House to "stop the B-52 bombing escalation." In three and a half years of air war, Proxmire argued, the United States had dropped more bombs on Vietnam than it had dropped on all theaters in World War II. And half of those bombs had been dropped on allied South Vietnam, a percentage that would soar if Johnson halted the bombing in the North as an incentive for peace talks. "If we don't set a limit," Proxmire said, "there will be nothing left in South Vietnam." Senator McGovern added that bombing had *increased* NVA ground infiltration—from just 400 troops in South Vietnam in 1965 to 60,000 in 1968. The "colossal military mistake" of bombing had *spread* the war, not confined it, and helped make a minor problem a major one.[41]

Clifford's strategic review was assisted by another meeting of the "Wise Men"—former cabinet secretaries, ambassadors, lawyers, bankers, judges, and generals, many of whom had been pondering Vietnam for twenty years. They met in Rusk's office in the last week of March 1968—Dean Acheson, George Ball, Omar Bradley, McGeorge Bundy, Arthur Dean, Douglas Dillon, Robert Murphy, Abe Fortas, Matthew Ridgway, Cy Vance, Maxwell Taylor, and Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. This was the same group that had expressed support for the war in November 1967, when Westmoreland had assured them that the conflict would be all but won within a year. Now they were informed, in a more realistic round of briefings organized by the State

Clark Clifford and Earle Wheeler debating Vietnam at the White House. Wheeler and Westy wanted more troops; Clifford, the new SecDef, deplored their unending demands and their inability to terminate the war. (LBJ Library)

Department, the CIA, and the Joint Chiefs, that the war would last "maybe five years, maybe ten years." The American people, Dillon interjected, wouldn't stand for such a thing. Clark Clifford agreed. "Boys," he drawled to the group, "it's not there." By "it," he meant popular support, and any formula for victory.[42]

The Wise Men then sat down with LBJ and Vice President Humphrey. The majority opinion was summarized by the seventy-five-year-old Acheson. The war had become too costly in every area, and the attempt to create popular support for a South Vietnamese government had failed. If 500,000 American troops could not make "the enemy sue for peace, it won't happen—at least not in any time the American people will permit." It was time to "disengage."[43]

Mac Bundy quibbled some more, preferring "deescalate" to "disengage," and LBJ's face darkened as he went around the table. "Those establishment bastards have bailed out," he muttered during a break outside the Cabinet Room. The walls were closing in on the incumbent president. His plan to offer Americans "the Churchill peace, not the Chamberlain peace," as he put it, would strain to meet even the Chamberlain standard. His polling for

the Wisconsin primary, just a week away, looked terrible, and yet, as Clark Clifford observed, all of the old PR tricks had lost their magic: "One thing seems sure—the old slogan that success is just around the corner won't work."[44]

The Wise Men, working with Clifford, Nitze, Warnke, and other senior officials, rejected out of hand major troop increases, reserve call-ups, more bombing, and incursions into North Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia. LBJ noted that the Senate would almost certainly filibuster any White House attempt to expand the war. All Clifford would concede to the chiefs and Westmoreland was an additional 24,500 troops—six combat battalions on an "emergency basis," raising the force level in Vietnam to 549,500, a number that, due to the lags in programming, would never actually be reached.[45]

What stood out about the Army-led strategic debate after Tet was its dishonesty. Privately, Wheeler and Westmoreland agreed between themselves to ask for 206,000 new troops in three "force increments." Only the first of the three increments—108,000 troops by May 1, 1968—would be guaranteed for Vietnam. It would furnish Westy with a theater reserve of two divisions plus support units. Wheeler planned to prep the next two force increments—43,000 and 55,000, respectively—for deployment to Vietnam in October and December only "if all the worst contingencies materialized." He knew that they almost certainly would not, and he would then send those troops not to Vietnam but to other theaters or to the strategic reserve. In early March 1968, Clifford's task force met with Wheeler to drill deeper on the rationale for a 206,000-troop increase. Wheeler made no mention of his parsing of the manpower into fungible increments, or Westmoreland's proposed offensive strategy, and instead passed the question along to Westy in Saigon for a more detailed answer.[46]

Westmoreland continued to prevaricate, giving no hint of a new strategy other than this: "Be prepared for contingency operations if required." His forces, he said, were "postured" to seal South Vietnam's borders against further infiltration. More troops would "add flexibility and punch." It was time to launch "a general offensive," to "carry the attack to the enemy," as if that had not been the essence of search and destroy all along.

Wheeler pressed LBJ to stay the course: "It is not timely to consider fundamental changes in strategy when we are fully committed in what could be the decisive battle of the war." Army briefers in Saigon hinted darkly but vaguely at new commitments. Asked directly by a reporter on March 20 if more US troops were needed in Vietnam, one replied with masterful obfuscation. It all depended, he said, on the "desired rate of concentration." He concluded with a puzzling epigram, from which only the most perceptive listeners might have inferred invasions of Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam: "You can defeat the iceberg on the surface of the water, but if it continues to form, that is not a decisive victory." In what the briefer must have regarded as helpful elucidation, he then uttered an even more confounding sentence: "By no means does this make a case for why what we have is sufficient to conclude it."

Those who claimed then and subsequently that the United States could have won the war with more aggressive methods must first explain the coquettish reticence of the Joint Chiefs and Westmoreland. How could the president be expected to adopt more aggressive methods if his field commander and military advisers spoke to him in riddles?[47]

Strategically, there was nothing new at "Pentagon East"—just more inconclusive flailing against an enemy who was weirdly becoming stronger, now equipping even his local forces with AK-47s and RPGs. Despite "losing" the Tet battle, the communists had succeeded in tearing away 40 percent of the hamlets that CORDS had certified as secure. After its Tet "victory," the Saigon government found itself in control of only 4,500 of the country's 13,984 hamlets. The communists were pushing into that vacuum as hungrily as all of the new refugees crowding into threadbare government camps and the pestilential slums around the cities. Saigon by 1968 was no longer a model of American-fostered development. It now led the world's major cities in cholera, smallpox, bubonic plague, and typhoid.[48]

Evaluating the deceptive approach that Wheeler and Westmoreland considered cunning, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Warnke judged it just plain stupid. Asking for 206,000 more troops to do "more of the same"—search and destroy in unpopulated areas—struck Warnke and the others as dead on arrival. They could discern in it "no military plan for attaining victory in Vietnam." And yet, Warnke added, "if it was thought that giving Westy the 206,000 would lead in fact to the invasion of Laos, Cambodia, or North Vietnam, a lot of people who *supported* the troop request would have *withdrawn* their support."[49]

Nor was there money to *pay* for a bigger war in an American economy that was already overheated and pushing the limits of American power. The war as it stood was costing over $25 billion a year. Tet and Khe Sanh alone added $5 billion in costs due to the increased tempo, additional deployments, and the need to overhaul or replace so much damaged or expended infrastructure and equipment. In Washington, liberal senators put their massive supplemental appropriation request in context. It alone would pay for interstate highways, school lunches, Head Start, the VISTA program, federal grants to universities, mortgage subsidies, veterans' benefits, environmental protection, and many other national priorities.[50]

Confronted with Westmoreland's call for reinforcements, Treasury Secretary Henry Fowler quailed at the price tag. These troops and their supporting elements would cost another $12.5 billion in 1968 and 1969. McNamara put their true cost at $15 billion, nearly doubling the war's annual cost. Even without that new spending, the budget deficit hit $23 billion in fiscal 1968.

"Inflation," one economist observed, "followed as the night the day." And the problem with inflation—6 percent in 1968—was that it alone, without any additional combat operations, drove the price of the war to alarming new heights. The only way to reduce inflation's effect—and to keep America's defense spending within feasible limits—was to wind the war down. Vietnam-era inflation also converted an American trade surplus into a trade deficit, as inflation eroded the competitiveness of US exports, increased the budget deficit at home, and forced LBJ to slam shut the US Treasury's "gold window" as foreign banks, panicked by America's reckless spending, began to convert billions of dollars to bullion.

Some have argued since the 1970s that, had the president only heeded Westmoreland's advice—tentative, cloaked, political, and inscrutable as it was—America could have won the war. It could not. The war was too costly, inflationary, unpopular, unfocused, and open-ended. Even Walt Rostow allowed that Vietnam by now represented "a gross overcommitment of U.S. military resources" given that North Vietnam's level of effort was unlimited and America's sharply limited by dwindling support and competing commitments. Dean Acheson put it this way in March 1968, words that prodded Johnson to relinquish the presidency: "We can no longer accomplish what we have set out to do in the time we have left and the time has come to disengage."[51]

Chapter 15

KHE SANH

In 1968, "disengaging" was only a dream. The United States had built to a strength of seven Army and two Marine divisions sprawled across South Vietnam, providing most of the security for the quarreling government and its floundering armed forces.

Despite the Tet "victory" and half a million American troops on the ground, no one seemed hopeful. Despite their "defeat" in Tet, the VC appeared to be in control everywhere, and they worked cleverly to win the peace being dangled by LBJ. Their "liberation forces" had failed to trigger a "general uprising." Now they tacked back to a more political line, sponsoring what they called an "Alliance of Democratic, National, and Peace Forces." Their symbol was a white dove on a blue field—sure to be popular with the South Vietnamese people, who had been scourged by American firepower for the past three years.[1]

In March 1968, the battered people of I Corps were given yet another reason to fear the trigger-happy Americans at least as much as the communists. Three platoons of the Americal Division's 11th Brigade, commanded by Captain Ernest Medina, air-assaulted into Song My, a VC-controlled village near Quang Ngai. The hamlets of Song My, situated inland from the VC-held Batangan Peninsula, were such a hive of communist activity that the Americans called the whole area "Pinkville."

Like many such places along the coastal plain in I Corps, the region had been declared a free-fire zone. All inhabitants had been ordered to

move to refugee camps so that any activity in the sector could be fired on. And yet many villagers had elected not to leave, preferring the risks of a free-fire zone to the squalor of the camps. Tim O'Brien, author of one of the great memoirs of the war, *The Things They Carried*, was a grunt in the Americal. "We were really hated," he recalled of his tour around Quang Ngai. "You could see the hostility in everybody's eyes."[2]

During the day, there were no military-aged men around, only women, children, and the elderly. The Americal, ordered to root out a VC local-force battalion known to be in the area, had already been to Song My twice in the last thirty days, taking casualties from mines, booby traps, and snipers each time. In this third search and destroy mission through "Pinkville," the grunts were in an ugly mood. They had been in the field for forty days without relief. One recalled that in the past two ops, they had passed safely through hamlets only to be sniped in the back by hidden VC: "Every time we got hit it was from the rear. So the third time in there the order came down to go in and make sure no one was behind."[3]

Those orders came down the chain of command, from the brigade commander to the company commander, Captain Medina, and then to the platoon leaders: "Go in there aggressively, close with the enemy, and wipe out for good." Medina ordered his company to kill everything that was "walking, crawling, or growling," burn the huts, and poison the wells.

Medina's three platoons surrounded a hamlet called My Lai 4. Two of them wrapped around it in a horseshoe formation, and the other—twenty-five-year-old William Calley's 1st Platoon—walked through the open end of the horseshoe to search the hamlet for VC and weapons. The whole op, a combat assault preceded by artillery, lasted three or four hours. There was heavy firing, and then the platoons moved on, Captain Medina radioing his infantry in My Lai—"The party's over, that's enough shooting for today"—and reporting a VC body count of 128.[4]

One of Lieutenant Calley's sergeants, Michael Bernhardt, followed 1st Platoon into My Lai 4 and immediately noticed that all of the fire he was hearing was outgoing, none incoming. Calley's grunts were entering the huts and shooting anyone inside, or setting the huts on fire and shooting the people when they ran outside. They were gathering villagers in groups and gunning them down. It was, Sergeant Bernhardt said, "point-blank murder," and it was captured on film by an Army photographer named Ronald Haeberle, who had hitched a ride with the seventy-man company to photograph the operation. There were no military-aged men among the 500 or so victims; they were all women, children, and old men. One hundred and twenty of them were kids under the age of five. More would have died had Hugh Thompson, a helicopter pilot from another outfit, not seen the massacre from above, landed, and ordered Medina's company to cease firing.[5]

Twenty-two-year-old Paul Meadlo later testified that Lieutenant Calley had assembled a group of forty or fifty civilians in the middle of My Lai 4 and ordered Meadlo to kill them: "Get with it," Calley said. "I want them dead." Calley, Bernhardt recalled, "was rotten to the core, pure evil," a loser who had flunked out of junior college, qualified for officer training only because the Army was so desperate for men willing to go to Vietnam, and did not miss the opportunity to rape villagers when he could, usually with his .45 pistol pressed to their heads. Calley, Meadlo, and others machine-gunned that group, then pushed another terrified clump of peasants into a drainage ditch and shot them as they lay helpless. Lieutenant Stephen Brooks, who commanded Medina's 2nd Platoon in My Lai, proved as odious as Calley. He "lost control," a grunt recalled, and let the platoon "run berserk" in his eagerness to be accepted as "one of the boys."[6]

Michael Terry, a grunt in Medina's Charlie Company, saw villagers being lined up along the edge of a ditch and mowed down. "It was," he said, "just like a Nazi-type thing." Some of the grunts refused to carry out the orders. Terry saw one soldier throw down his weapon and walk away. But Bernhardt estimated that 90 percent of the men in the company joined in the shootings. Meadlo recalled that Captain Medina was present for much of the massacre. "He and Calley passed each other quite a few times that morning, but didn't say anything. Medina could have put a stop to it anytime he wanted." Medina didn't want to stop it. Hovering over the hamlet in his helicopter, Hugh Thompson watched the captain walk up to a wounded girl, kick her, and then shoot her in the head.[7]

News of My Lai and the massacre of at least ninety more civilians by a company of the 4th Battalion of the 3rd Infantry Regiment at the nearby hamlet of My Khe spread through the US forces. Atrocities were common enough—grunts raping, abusing, or killing villagers they encountered—and word of them was usually suppressed by higher-ups, but this was on a grand scale, too big to suppress. An officer in Saigon recalled that he heard about

the "Pinkville Massacre" almost immediately and was "amazed" that the Army was able to hush it up for over a year.

LBJ would not hear of My Lai until after he left office. It would not emerge as an issue until late 1969, when Ron Ridenhour, a grunt in the Americal who had heard about the slaughter from Terry and Bernhardt, exposed the ongoing cover-up. In March 1969, a year after the massacre, Ridenhour wrote a three-page letter describing the atrocity and copied thirty US officials, including the chief of staff of the Army and several senators. It was that letter that forced the Army to reopen the investigation fifteen months later.[8]

For now, MACV turned a blind eye to My Lai, for Westmoreland was fixated on Khe Sanh. In one of the many ironies of the terrible and wasteful war, LBJ's decision to seek peace and disengage from the conflict coincided with the onset of its bloodiest battle in the hills around the Marine combat base.

The president's remarks to Dean Rusk when the battle began captured his mood of defeat: "It appears to be the judgment of our enemies that we are sufficiently weak and uncertain at home, sufficiently stretched in our military dispositions abroad, and sufficiently anxious to end the war in Vietnam that we are likely to accept, if not defeat, at least a degree of humiliation." He then pointed to increased North Korean aggression, Pyongyang's seizure of the USS *Pueblo*, Hanoi's brazen descent on Khe Sanh with 40,000 men, and the surging VC attacks against airfields, cities, and towns all over South Vietnam as indisputable evidence that the enemy believed that America was beaten. LBJ clearly thought so too. He saw no way out of the dead end other than more spending, new taxes, bigger drafts, extended tours of duty, and "greater unity" at home. The chances of getting those things, or even most of them, were nil.[9]

The NVA's siege of Khe Sanh, begun on January 21, 1968, intensified in the weeks that followed, heavier NVA bombardments of the base coinciding with the Clifford review and the president's decision to end the war. This futility of effort and waste of good lives is what gave the battle such an enduring stench. With heavy rains blinding and grounding American aircraft, the NVA was able to isolate this far western end of the DMZ, cut Route 9, and begin surrounding Khe Sanh. And yet, Michael Herr observed on a visit to the Marine combat base, "on the higher levels of Command, the *Khe Sanh* situation was being regarded with great optimism, the kind that had seen us through Tet, smiling in the shambles."[10]

To prevent Khe Sanh from becoming another Dien Bien Phu, the daily obsession of President Johnson, the Marines clung to the hilltop outposts, making it harder for the NVA to encircle and pulverize the combat base. The Marine outposts on four critical hills, all identified by their elevation, would make the difference in the siege. The NVA had taken Hill 881N, but its view of the combat base was blocked by the Marine-held hills in between. Those hills—881S, 861, 861A, and 558, a long blue ridge hulking over the base—were exposed, dangerous, and adrift on a spreading sea of NVA manpower and artillery.

About 3,000 Marines held the hills at any given time during the siege while another 3,000 Marines and 600 ARVN Rangers held the combat base. The Marines in the hills waited in trenches, with runway matting stretched over the top and piled with eight layers of sandbags plus a layer of rocks or 105 mm shell casings. That was enough—maybe—to stop a mortar round, but it would collapse under 152 mm artillery or the 122 mm rockets fired from launch sites on Hill 881N. The daily struggle for the hills was a key feature of the siege. If the NVA pushed the Marines off the summits, they would be able to "fire right down the throats of the base defenders and make their position untenable," a Marine captain wrote.[11]

The combat base itself, two square miles of red dirt, was safer only because there were more Marines and ARVN gathered there in better defenses. Bunkers for the expanded garrison were scraped from the red soil of the plateau. These dugouts, a few still intact and scattered around the old combat base today, would be home for the Marines. They were wretched holes in the ground, eight feet long and eight feet wide. Their only real requirement was that they withstand the blast of an 82 mm mortar round. A log in each corner supported layers of planks, runway matting, and 5,000 sandbags, with loose dirt poured in between the two or three sandbag layers. Another log rose from the center of the dugout, further confining the Marines inside, who would hug their legs and tuck their chins whenever the NVA guns fired. The whole sodden scene seemed designed to confirm the old Army jest: "Marines know how to die."[12]

A reporter who spent a night in one of those bunkers was most impressed by the stench: "the smell of urine, of old, old sweat, C-ration

decay, moldy canvas and private crud." Trenches were dug around the perimeter and more runway matting, piled high with sandbags, was placed at intervals along the trench so that Marines standing guard in the trenches could dive under cover whenever enemy rounds fell. Besieged by two NVA divisions, the Marines sent daily patrols a quarter mile beyond the fence to give early warning of any enemy assaults that might be creeping forward in the fog.[13]

In the first week of February, while the combat still raged in Hue and Saigon and Wheeler and Westy were cooking up their plan to dupe the president about force levels, two battalions of the NVA 304th Division, supported by twelve tanks, overran the Lang Vei Special Forces camp, which overlooked the border with Laos just three miles southwest of Khe Sanh. The Green Berets at Lang Vei had moved there from Khe Sanh in 1966, when the combat base, just six miles from the Ho Chi Minh Trail, had been expanded and entrusted to the Marines. The tanks, the first used by the communists inside South Vietnam, cut through the good defenses at Lang Vei and spearheaded the rout of the garrison.

Flushed from their bunkers by flamethrowers and satchel charges, the 24 Green Berets and 400 Montagnard troops at Lang Vei fought for their lives. The Green Beret commander called in air strikes and artillery on his own position. Half of his men were killed or captured; the survivors fled in the night toward the gates of the Khe Sanh combat base, where 100 stragglers turned up early on February 7 pleading to be let inside.

Colonel David Lownds, who commanded the 26th Marine Regiment and the combat base, felt certain that the Lang Vei attack was intended to lure him outside and into an ambush. He rebuffed Army calls to send Marines to relieve the garrison at Lang Vei, leading to a bitter fight between the services that was resolved only when Westy personally ordered Marine helicopters to fly Army Green Berets into the Special Forces camp to rescue any survivors.

Having overrun Lang Vei in the night, the NVA took control of Route 9 on both sides of Khe Sanh. Next, the NVA committed an entire battalion of the 325C Division to overrun Hill 861A. Khe Sanh could not be besieged forever. Major reinforcements, reliably clear skies, and unrestricted American airpower would eventually force the big NVA units to scatter and abandon the siege.

The communists doubled down, moving their antiaircraft guns under the cover of fog, rain, and darkness closer to the Khe Sanh airstrip, which was the base's only lifeline. They also began digging siege works like the ones they had used to strangle Dien Bien Phu.

The Marines first detected them in late February: trenches and supply bunkers dug toward the Khe Sanh perimeter, branching off to run parallel to the Marine lines as they got closer to the fence. Every inch the NVA sapped forward made it harder to bomb them. The rule of thumb for safe bombing around friendly troops was one yard from friendlies for every pound of ordnance delivered. For a 500-pound bomb, the enemy had to be at least 500 yards away. For B-52 strikes, the enemy had to be 3,000 yards away. Even the Marine decision to narrow that "safe" envelope to just 1,100 yards would give little protection against a foe who dug to within a half mile of the base. On CBS, Walter Cronkite, already alarmed by the loss of Lang Vei to NVA tanks, warned that "Khe Sanh could well fall with the terrible loss of American lives, prestige, and morale." Contemplating the role of LBJ and Westy, Cronkite added: "And this is a tragedy of our stubbornness there."[14]

If the NVA got close enough to launch infantry attacks, defense of the combat base would hinge on artillery and tactical air strikes. Colonel Lownds said at the start of the siege that "the side which can keep its artillery intact will win the battle." Khe Sanh's artillery had two critical missions: defensive fire plans to keep the enemy away from Khe Sanh's hilltop outposts and perimeter, and final protective fires to destroy the enemy if and when he massed his strength for an all-out assault on the combat base.

The French artillery at Dien Bien Phu had undertaken the same missions but had been crushed by the Viet Minh batteries, leaving Dien Bien Phu all but defenseless. The Marines did better, holding the most critical high ground throughout the siege and losing only three guns in the entire course of it. They placed their howitzers in sandbagged revetments, where only a direct hit could knock the gun out, and stored their shells in twelve-foot-deep berms accessed by trucks that darted between the batteries.

Well supplied by Westy's airlift, the motto of the Marine artillery at Khe Sanh was "Be Generous." They had forty-six guns in five batteries at Khe Sanh and were supported by four Army batteries of 175 mm artillery, one at the Rockpile, nine miles northeast of Khe Sanh, and the others at

Camp Carroll, thirteen miles to the northeast. In the course of the siege, they would fire over 100,000 rounds, which was about 1,500 rounds a day. The fire of these guns, near and far, was controlled by the Fire Support Coordination Center inside the combat base as well as the Direct Air Support Center, which had to make sure that barrages of artillery did not collide with US aircraft.[15]

Artillery played an even larger role in Khe Sanh's defense than usual because Westy's air campaign to defend the isolated base was hampered by the foul weather, described by the 3rd Marine Division commander as "the worst I've ever seen for combat purposes."

Helicopters needed a minimum 1,500-foot ceiling to shoot an overhead approach into LZs on the hills or the combat base. Yet on the cloudy Khe Sanh plateau, a notch in the high mountains dividing Vietnam and Laos, visibility for fixed-wing and helicopter pilots was "below minimum" about 40 percent of the time—even in the dry season.

The cargo planes that flew essential supplies to Khe Sanh had to contend both with NVA antiaircraft guns, which fired at the sound of the incoming planes, and with heavy mortar and rocket fire, which struck Khe Sanh's airstrip whenever the planes touched down. The Marines called these C-130s and C-123s "mortar magnets," and the pilots acted accordingly, diving steeply into the base, unloading, taking on passengers and wounded, and then taking off again, all in three minutes or less, as mortar and rocket rounds detonated along their path. They would touch down, shove pallets of supplies and ammo out the doors, and load running passengers and stretcher-bearers as the pilot turned around on the short runway, never stopping. Under these conditions, more than half of the supplies for the base had to be dropped in by parachute.[16]

The most dangerous job of all was resupplying the hilltop outposts, which, with enemy trenches dug between the base and the hills, could only be done by CH-46 Sea Knight cargo helicopters, the smaller, lighter Marine equivalent of the Army's Chinook. Those pilots had to contend with blistering machine gun and RPG fire whenever they came in or out, and mortar fire when they touched down. On an average day, the Marines might lose three of these big choppers as they struggled to land on the hills.

To keep the approach lanes open and the hills in American hands, the Marine Air Group at Chu Lai introduced the "super gaggle," yet another example of American ingenuity in this unforgiving war. The "super gaggle," which sharply reduced helicopter losses over the hills, teamed the cargo helicopters with attack aircraft and gunships. Twelve A-4 Skyhawks would streak over the hills as the cargo helicopters, lumbering forward with 4,000-pound external loads, neared the hills. Four Skyhawks would hit the enemy gun positions with bombs and napalm. Two other Skyhawks would drench those positions with tear gas. Forty seconds before the final run-in by the helicopters, two more Skyhawks would lay a smoke screen all along the lines of approach while four others swarmed over the enemy positions hitting them with cluster bomblets, rockets, and 20 mm cannon fire. The gunships came in last, to add to the suppressive fire and rescue any downed cargo pilots.[17]

All of this was part of Operation Niagara, the great air umbrella deployed by Westmoreland to prevent the fall of Khe Sanh. "No regiment in history ever had such an overwhelming amount of firepower at their disposal," one awed Marine wrote. Westmoreland spared no expense to prevent the NVA from achieving what he called "a battlefield spectacular." By now, there were millions of eyeballs on Khe Sanh. In the United States, it was the most heavily reported story of the war. Reporters shuttled in and out of the Marine combat base, and the networks devoted most of their film reports to it.[18]

Between January and April 1968, Khe Sanh was the busiest airspace in Vietnam, with an average of 184 attack sorties every twenty-four hours. For Marines on the hills and in the base, the howl of jet engines became just another note in the background noise of thunder, rain, and artillery. Marine, Navy, and Air Force strike fighters stacked themselves up to a height of 35,000 feet over the combat base in tight, circular holding patterns. As the planes at the base of the stack delivered their bombs against NVA targets and scooted for home, the flights above them, guided by air or ground controllers, augured down through the clouds and fog to find holes in the overcast, snake through, and drop their bombs. Besides enemy fire, they had to contend with dust and haze when there wasn't fog and rain, as well as camouflaged helicopters and Cessna spotter planes, which were easy to miss in a jet hurtling at the speed of sound.[19]

More damage to the NVA was done by the B-52 Stratofortress. Flying out of Guam and Thailand, three- or six-plane "packages" hit the NVA

forces around Khe Sanh every two or three hours for sixty-six days. Each B-52 lugged a twenty-seven-ton payload of 108 bombs, a mix of 500- and 750-pounders. In the course of the siege, the B-52s flew 2,602 sorties over Khe Sanh and dropped 75,631 tons of bombs, twice the sorties and tonnage employed in all other areas of South Vietnam and the DMZ combined. The NVA, which had massed in bunker complexes around Khe Sanh, were easy targets. The Air Force programmed the enemy coordinates into the B-52 onboard computers, which released the bombs from altitudes above 30,000 feet.[20]

The pilots never saw the bombs hit and the North Vietnamese troops on the ground never heard them coming. They would be abruptly caught in the maelstrom, the terrain ripped up around them, trees hewn down, the ground shaking from the blasts. Many of the enemy died from the concussion alone, or from internal hemorrhaging. Communist soldiers would wander around aimlessly after the strikes, blood pouring from their noses, mouths, and ears.

An NVA diary entry from February 18 read: "The B-52 explosions are so strong that our lungs hurt." The Marines learned to put massed artillery fire into every target area fifteen minutes after the bombers departed to kill the dazed survivors, who would just be digging themselves out to emerge aboveground. A veteran recalled his first sight of ground pounded by the Buffs: "Trees eighty to one hundred feet tall were stacked up like matchsticks on the edges of the craters. The craters were thirty to forty feet across, and deep enough to hold a basement for the average two-story house in America."[21]

The communists never seriously threatened Khe Sanh. The NVA general staff had hoped that rain and fog would nullify American firepower, but American technology, ingenuity, and largesse prevailed. On an average winter day at Khe Sanh, there were 350 American fighter-bombers and 60 B-52s dropping 1,800 tons of bombs around the combat base. In their 22,000 sorties, they dropped 100,000 tons of bombs, which worked out to five tons of bombs for *each* of the 20,000 NVA troops committed to the siege. NVA troops moving or digging at night would be hit by cluster bomb and napalm strikes that showered them with grenade-sized bomblets and flaming sheets of jellied gasoline. The Marine and Army artillery used ground and aerial observers, photo reconnaissance, infrared imagery, signals intelligence, and strings of hundreds of acoustic and seismic sensors, dropped by Navy patrol bombers into the NVA positions and all around the combat base, to fire accurately in all conditions.[22]

The sensors, part of a larger program code-named Muscle Shoals, were supposed to give early warning of enemy concentrations or movements but were as problematic here as they were on the short-lived McNamara Line. They were frequently activated by friendly bombs and shells, by passing Montagnards, or by wild animals prowling around them. Nevertheless, they detected every major NVA attempt to attack Khe Sanh. A quiet area would suddenly buzz with activity as troops gathered and convoys moved. The Marine artillery would fire "boxes" of shells around the seismic activity, working them in and out like pistons, and air strikes would saturate the area with bombs and napalm, breaking up any major offensive before it could launch.[23]

American logistics delivered so much ammunition to Khe Sanh that the Marines, despite their isolation, fired fourteen shells for every one received in the siege. They endured a total of 11,000 incoming rounds and fired 159,000 back at the enemy. They were so amply supplied with ammo that by March 1968, two months into the siege, they had accumulated more shells than their storage berms could hold—a single data point that perfectly depicted the futility of Hanoi's attempt to strangle the combat base.[24]

Both of these tools—artillery and airpower—had their severest test during the night of February 29, when the NVA launched their biggest assault on the base. The sensors strung along Route 9 lit up as elements of the NVA 304th Division advanced toward the eastern perimeter of the combat base, which was defended by the ARVN Rangers. Unable to capture the critical hills around the base, the NVA was trying to take Khe Sanh by storm, launching three attacks that night and into the predawn hours of March 1.

The first attack came at 9:30 p.m. and the last at 3:15 in the morning, which was enough time for B-52s to be diverted to Khe Sanh to join in the slaughter wrought by massed artillery and waves of tac air strikes. The next day, the Marines found dozens of dead NVA sappers crouched in trenches near the perimeter, killed by airbursts. Behind them, other assault formations and reserves had been obliterated by concentrated fire after they tripped the electronic sensors. The B-52s had carpeted every line of retreat with high explosive. The tentativeness of the attack and the haste with which

the NVA broke it off confirmed that they were not willing to pay an unlimited price for Khe Sanh.[25]

President Johnson apparently was. The cost of defending Khe Sanh, a base that would shortly be abandoned, was astronomical. The price of the Scotland and Niagara operations, added to the costs of Tet, made 1968 the costliest and bloodiest year of the war for the United States. Nearly 17,000 Americans would be killed in 1968, over 87,000 wounded, and another $27 billion flushed down the drain. The war's costs—over $2 billion every month—would shortly eclipse all of the money that had been spent on higher education, mortgage subsidies, and police protection in the entire history of the United States. These were shocking numbers for a domestic-reform president like LBJ.[26]

While the siege progressed, Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford finished his review. He called it "a whole new look at the whole situation," the first really strategic review of a war that had grown gradually, massively, and unthinkingly.

To Westmoreland's call for troops, Clifford answered: "We can no longer rely just on the field commander. He can want troops and want troops and want troops, but we must look at the overall impact on *us*." The new SecDef cited the antiwar movement, inflation, the alienation of allies, the still "bleak" negotiations track, and the crushing opportunity cost of pouring so much into a lost cause. "I am not sure we can ever find our way out if we continue to shovel men into Vietnam."

Johnson heard the findings and sadly decided that the war had killed his presidency. He had narrowly defeated antiwar candidate Eugene McCarthy in New Hampshire's primary on March 12, and took another hit four days later when Robert F. Kennedy announced that he too would challenge Johnson for the nomination that summer. "All of you," LBJ berated his senior advisers, "have counseled, advised, consulted and then—as usual—placed the monkey on my back again." The Vietnam monkey now reached around to throttle the president and Westmoreland. Hanoi had failed to collapse South Vietnam, but it had succeeded in one of its aims: "to break America's will to war."[27]

Clifford concluded that no amount of American reinforcements—"not 206,000, or double or triple that quantity"—could win the war in view of the Saigon government's unpopularity, the continuing weakness of the ARVN, and Hanoi's determination to prevail. It was no longer feasible, Clifford said, to achieve even America's minimum war aim, which he defined as "a viable South Vietnam which can live in peace."[28]

On March 24, 1968, the *New York Times* broke the news that LBJ had made the decision to sack Westmoreland and bring him back to Washington as Army chief of staff that summer. On March 31, even as 18,000 troopers of the Cav "saddled up" and prepared to fly to the relief of the Marines at Khe Sanh, President Johnson went on television at 9:00 p.m. to announce a bombing halt in North Vietnam and his appointment of Averell Harriman to be his personal representative at peace talks in Paris.

Johnson then read lines that shocked the nation: "I will not seek, nor will I accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president." The United States, LBJ asserted, had been torn apart by the war. "The unity of our people," he said, "must not now be lost in suspicion, distrust, selfishness, and politics." To bind up America's wounds, the president would "deescalate the conflict...and move immediately toward peace through negotiations." Johnson offered to pause most of the Rolling Thunder air strikes without conditions "to permit the contending forces to move closer to a political settlement."[29]

This was a pivotal moment in the war. The American president was publicly announcing that the search for a military solution was over and the quest for a nonmilitary, negotiated solution was on. Thousands of lives and billions of dollars had been wasted, as three years earlier, in January 1965, Johnson had rejected precisely the course he now adopted: "Deploy all of our resources along a track of negotiation aimed at salvaging what little can be preserved."[30]

He was giving away for free the bombing halt that he had tried to sell for major concessions in 1965 and 1967. Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon, who was campaigning against LBJ's military "gradualism," called Johnson's latest move "camouflaged surrender." More than any other single event, this capitulation by one of the fiercest and most ambitious politicians in American history proved that Hanoi's Tet Offensive had achieved its purpose—turning the American press, public, and political establishment irrevocably against the war.[31]

In his last meetings before the decision, LBJ had seen no viable path forward. Westmoreland's troop surge would cost at least $20 billion. Four

thousand American troops had been killed in the last weeks alone, and yet MACV had no solutions other than relentless escalation, Westy writing the president on March 28 that "the enemy has no predesignated point for his main effort, no timetable, only a constant opportunism" fueled by a largely unimpeded flow of new VC recruits and NVA infiltrators, who had little to fear from the ARVN and the ruff-puffs, who had vanished back into their sandbagged posts after Tet. No one seemed to be in charge, with the ARVN reporting a shortage of 5,000 officers in the ranks between captain and colonel. The shortage was owed more to desertion than casualties. Over the past two years, the US Marines, with one-seventh as many troops in Vietnam as the ARVN, had lost seven times more majors and lieutenant colonels in action than the skittish ARVN. American casualties had soared 500 percent even as ARVN casualties were static.[32]

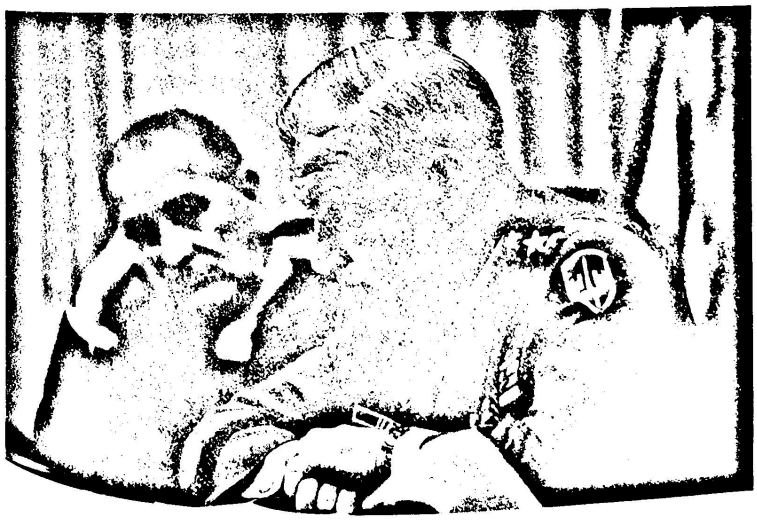
Westy's deputy and imminent replacement, General Creighton Abrams, pulled his staff together and told them what they would soon be facing from Washington when he took command of MACV: "You might be asked, 'what should you do?' Suppose you answer, 'we'll just keep on doing what we're doing.' And the next question would be, 'how long is that going to take?' Then, 'what's that going to do? What's the price tag on that? How many lives are you talking about? Another 30,000? I mean, where is this going to wind up?'" Abrams paused, glanced around the room, and concluded: "It could be quite a problem."[33]

Brought to the White House in March 1968 to supply answers to the very questions he had anticipated, Abrams was not nearly as venturesome in the Family Dining Room as he had been in the briefing he'd given his staff at "Pentagon East." When asked directly and beseechingly by LBJ, "Is there *anything* we should be doing that we aren't doing?" Abrams sat quietly while General Wheeler recited the party line: "Our basic strategy is sound; we can't fight a war on the defensive and win, so Westmoreland is on the tactical offense." LBJ had heard all of this before.

The president turned hopefully to Abrams, and got the same party line: "I don't feel we need to change strategy, we need to be more flexible tactically inside South Vietnam." What did *that* mean? And what time, effort, and loss did it entail? Probably Abrams was displaying loyalty to Westmoreland by not showing his hand prematurely, but he was denying the president critical advice that he so clearly needed. Abrams refused to elaborate, and the Army continued to speak in riddles. Politically, Johnson felt totally isolated as he implemented what he called "strategy change." "Everybody," he groaned to his advisers, "is recommending surrender." Everyone around him was "gloomy and doomy," except the generals, who remained full of hope but gave him no solutions.[34]

March 31, the day Johnson announced a halt to the bombing of most of North Vietnam as well as his decision not to run for reelection, was also the end of the Marines' ordeal at Khe Sanh. With reliably clear skies, the Army and Marines terminated Operation Scotland and launched Operation Pegasus on April 1, moving those 18,000 troops of the Cav to a river valley eleven miles northeast of Khe Sanh, just beyond the range of the NVA artillery in Laos that had been pummeling the Marine combat base. There the Cav cut LZ Stud out of the wilderness—"a forward operating base that looked better than most permanent installations in I Corps," a reporter observed. Marine engineers moved along Route 9, fixing bridges, removing mines, and meeting no real resistance. The Marines had suffered 205 killed and 1,670 wounded during the siege. They found only 1,602 NVA dead around their perimeter but estimated that the total might be as high as 15,000.[35]

Creighton Abrams meeting in the White House with LBJ in March 1968. No less than Westy, Abrams spoke in riddles, exasperating the war-weary president. (LBJ Library)



Westmoreland was leaving Vietnam because of the shock of Tet and his own ineffectual performance as field commander. Internal Army surveys revealed what may have been his greatest "strategic failure"—that over 70 percent of the generals he commanded were never sure what he was trying to accomplish with all of his flailing operations.

Nevertheless, Westy treated Khe Sanh like a lap of honor, boasting to *Time* magazine in April 1968 of a 75:1 kill ratio and great strategic gains. In fact, the kill ratio was probably closer to 5:1, less than half of what was considered remarkable in American military circles. If you counted all of the Marine, Army, Navy, and Air Force personnel killed in Operations Scotland, Pegasus, and Scotland II—the Marine accompaniment to Pegasus—American KIAs were 1,000, not 200. And if you subjected Westy's NVA body count to a more scrupulous analysis, it was closer to 5,000 than 15,000. MACV's own numbers—never published by Westmoreland, because they made him look bad—indicated that 5,500 NVA had probably died at Khe Sanh: 3,500 from air and artillery, 2,000 in ground attacks. In that secret internal analysis, MACV concluded that the North Vietnamese decision *not* to launch a major ground assault against the combat base spared them the many thousands of additional casualties that Westmoreland counted anyway.[36]

Chapter 16

MINI-TET

In his nationally televised address on March 31, 1968, when President Johnson announced that he would not seek reelection, he also declared a unilateral bombing halt in North Vietnam above the 20th parallel. This concession diminished the leverage of bombing. Only 10 percent of North Vietnam's population lived south of the 20th parallel. Relatively few would be inconvenienced (or killed) by bombs dropped there.[1]

One who was vastly inconvenienced by the partial bombing halt was Hubert Humphrey. With Johnson bowing out, the vice president hungered for the presidency, but he would have to fight his way through a pack of contenders that included instant front-runner Robert F. Kennedy, peace candidate Eugene McCarthy, segregationist George Wallace, and, quite possibly, a resurgent LBJ, who, if successful in his bid for peace, might be drafted by the Democratic National Convention in August to run again. Bobby Kennedy stated his opposition to the war plainly: "It is time to face the reality that a military victory is not in sight, and that it probably never will come."

Vice President Humphrey wallowed in no-man's-land. Privately, he lamented his past support for the war, now allowing that the United States was "throwing lives and money down a corrupt rat-hole in South Vietnam." Publicly, he did not dare break with LBJ, who was still commanding the war as well as the Democratic Party campaign funds that Humphrey

would need if nominated. The bestselling novelist Saul Bellow, who knew Humphrey from his days as a professor at the University of Minnesota, had planned to write an admiring piece about the vice president, but he put his pen down, "anticipating," as he put it, "no pleasure in writing about poor Hubert's misery as LBJ's captive."[2]

Hanoi was subject to none of these doubts and course changes. Lieutenant Commander John McCain III, who had been shot down and imprisoned in Hanoi six months earlier, recalled the elation expressed by his guards after Tet and Johnson's bombing halt: "They thought they had the war won." None of the guards and prison officials were surprised by the bombing halt. One of them had told McCain it was going to happen a month before it did. "They were convinced that they had wrecked Johnson's chances for re-election. And they thought they had the majority of the American people on their side."

John McCain was visited in his cell by two North Vietnamese generals, who boasted that the NVA was just getting started: "After we liberate South Vietnam we're going to liberate Cambodia. And after Cambodia we're going to liberate Laos, and after we liberate Laos we're going to liberate Thailand. And after we liberate Thailand we're going to liberate Malaysia, and then Burma. We're going to liberate all of Southeast Asia."[3]

For now, the NVA used the bombing halt to reinforce and resupply its units in South Vietnam. MACV's weekly situation reports described an enemy army of at least 200,000 inside South Vietnam. VC losses during Tet had been offset by 229,000 fresh troops infiltrated into South Vietnam during and after the offensive, more than enough to replace casualties in the NVA divisions and put 14,000 "fillers" into the decimated VC units.[4]

The supply surge enabled by Johnson's bombing halt was dramatic, from a weekly average of 1,300 North Vietnamese trucks moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos to 2,300 trucks every week in April. And these were just trucks sighted from the air; there were many others unseen as they crawled under jungle canopy and through the dark of night.

In Cambodia, freighters carrying tons of Chinese-made weapons docked at Sihanoukville. Their cargos were sent along the coast to the Mekong Delta or distributed among Cambodian Chinese trucking companies and driven through Phnom Penh—under the protection of the royal family—and all the way north to Bo Kheo, where the Cambodians were met by VC drivers, who moved the cargo onto their trucks and drove into South Vietnam's Central Highlands.

To handle these big shipments, the communists repaired their essential roads in I and II Corps and extended their critical routes in the A Shau and Plei Tran Valleys, treating South Vietnamese territory as their own. It was clear to MACV that the enemy had reduced offensive action not as a deescalation measure to secure the bombing halt but rather to rebuild units that had been cut to pieces in the Tet Offensive.[5]

By 1968, the A Shau Valley in I Corps was a major artery of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The NVA troops who had attacked Hue during Tet had come from here, as had their reinforcements. Before Tet, Westmoreland had planned to assault and seize the A Shau in one of his "war-winning" offensives against the communist sanctuaries—this one *inside* the borders of South Vietnam. It was an NVA fortress crammed with truck parks, supply bunkers, regimental headquarters, and hospitals, and it was stirring again.

Looking at the growing NVA and VC numbers as well as the rising volume of supplies bumping down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the CIA saw phase two of Hanoi's Tet Offensive taking shape. CIA analysts warned that a "second general offensive" was imminent, whether on May Day, May 7 (the date Dien Bien Phu fell), or May 11 or 19 (the birthdays of Buddha and Ho Chi Minh, respectively).[6]

Westmoreland took the offensive, launching Operation Delaware on April 19, 1968, with brigades of the 101st Airborne Division and the Cav, who had just lifted the siege of Khe Sanh. The Cav flew into the northwest end of the A Shau Valley, while the 101st Airborne approached from the east to seize a key piece of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Westy felt confident; with 20,000 troops and 450 helicopters, the Cav and the 101st Airborne had the resources to move, fight, and win. Or so he thought, with the obduracy that was his trademark.[7]

The weather did not cooperate. April was supposed to be dry in the valley, but this one was wet. With the high peaks flanking the A Shau Valley cloaked in rain, clouds, and fog, the Cav ran into the heaviest weather and antiaircraft fire of the war. Slicks with troops and Chinooks with sling-loaded artillery were shot down in previously unimaginable numbers. Ten helicopters were lost and twenty-three badly damaged on the first day alone.[8]

The brave men of the Cav, who would suffer the highest casualties of any American division in Vietnam, slopped along the valley for three weeks under torrential rains that washed away airstrips and left the grunts reliant on airdrops of food and ammo from C-130s flying at great risk just above the valley floor. The brigade of the 101st Airborne, trying to work in from the east to take the A Shau defenders between two fires, never broke through the NVA bunker lines guarding that flank.

Westmoreland terminated the op after twenty-eight days, published a long list of captured enemy matériel, and judged Delaware a "major success." It was anything but. The Army and Marines had avoided the A Shau Valley for three years because all of their manpower in I Corps was tied up along the DMZ and in the coastal plain. There was nothing to spare for the A Shau. There still wasn't. The Cav and the B-52s blasted the valley for four weeks, killed 739 of the enemy, and then left, ending the op, as Michael Herr put it, "like a speech cut at mid-sentence."[9]

Most of the NVA forces in the A Shau had slipped across the border to Laos during the operation. A rear guard had remained behind to fight from networks of bunkers carved into the wooded peaks flanking the only road through the valley. The moment the Cav and the Airborne withdrew, the NVA crossed back into the valley from Laos, replacing the matériel they had lost to Operation Delaware with new deliveries along the uninterrupted Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Cav's after-action assertion that it had demonstrated to the enemy "that he has no sanctuaries" was laughable on its face. By this date, half of the US combat troops in Vietnam were up here in I Corps—thirty Army and twenty-four Marine maneuver battalions—and yet the enemy continued to move and operate freely everywhere, most of all in the A Shau.[10]

The Americans lost 142 dead and 530 wounded in Operation Delaware. Twenty-seven helicopters were destroyed, with thirty-five others badly damaged. Westmoreland's claims of victory, Michael Herr observed, "were made for once without much enthusiasm, indicating that even the Command had to acknowledge the inviolability of the place."[11]

Westmoreland had vowed to "break the NVA stranglehold" on the valley, and failed. Operation Delaware proved again the hollowness of the argument that had the Americans only attacked the cross-border sanctuaries they could have won the war. The A Shau Valley was a sanctuary inside South Vietnam, a major hub of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, with a more or less permanent garrison of 20,000 NVA troops rotating in and out of combat. The Army and Marines—stretched to the breaking point elsewhere in I Corps—couldn't even take and hold *this* sanctuary. How would they have taken and controlled the much larger sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos with a total strength in South Vietnam that never exceeded nine US infantry divisions and couldn't be increased beyond that number?

As the Cav sank into the mud of the A Shau Valley, Hanoi's Second General Offensive or "Mini-Tet," as it came to be called, exploded at midnight on May 4, 1968. It was not "mini" at all. It lasted for a week, during which more Americans were killed than in any other week of the war. It flickered out, and then resumed for three more weeks at the end of May.

The fighting coincided with the start of LBJ's long-sought peace talks at the Hotel Majestic in Paris in the second week of May. The American delegation, led by seventy-six-year-old Averell Harriman, had just taken their seats when the whole conference had to be suspended because of a general strike and student riots in Paris against the Vietnam War and the conservative government of President Charles de Gaulle.

Wincing from tear gas and the cries of rioters and riot police, the peacemakers may have wished that they had chosen one of the other candidate cities for the conference—Warsaw or Phnom Penh. But wherever they located, there would be delays. No progress would be made for the next six *months*, as the North Vietnamese delegation, steered by Le Duan's deputy Le Duc Tho, haggled over everything—whether to admit South Vietnamese negotiators, whether to cease their attacks in the South, and on what terms to convert the partial bombing halt to a full bombing halt. The delays were deliberate, "talks about talks" to divide Washington and Saigon, tie American hands, and mollify Mao Zedong, who opposed *any* negotiations.[12]

There were no delays of Mini-Tet. Determined to keep the pressure on, provoke the general uprising that had not materialized during Tet, and hasten the American withdrawal, the communists attacked again all across South Vietnam, hitting 129 military bases, provincial capitals, and district towns. Again they were driven off, but the CIA concluded that the fury of this May 1968 offensive, added to that of Tet, succeeded in driving a permanent wedge between the South Vietnamese people and their government. Everywhere, the CIA reported, communists "are intimidating

or convincing people to support the VC and destroy government mechanisms." Security, the CIA added, was more "precarious" than ever, with the Viet Cong free to recruit, tax, and propagandize.[13]

Mini-Tet also confirmed to Americans that the war was hopeless. MACV was in the midst of Operation Complete Victory in the Saigon Ctr. cle when the communist offensive erupted. Every US and ARVN combat unit in III Corps had already been fighting for a month. Five hundred and sixty-four Americans and nearly 800 ARVN had been killed in yet another unsuccessful effort to destroy the same communist units that now moved into Saigon for the second time in four months.

With elements of the US 9th and 25th Infantry Divisions and the 199th Light Infantry Brigade forced to fight in the streets of Saigon against fanatical VC resistance, US casualties in May 1968 were the highest of the war: 2,169 Americans killed in a single month, a figure that was even more

With American troops forced to fight in the streets of Saigon, US casualties in May 1968 were the highest of the war. Here grunts of the 9th ID move cautiously through a ruined Saigon neighborhood. (National Archives)

distressing to Americans when they learned that it outnumbered South Vietnamese KIAs of 2,054. Also disturbing was the discovery that the casualty rate in American maneuver battalions in the first half of 1968 was *four times higher* than the World War II average for all theaters. By 1968 there were twenty-three American hospitals in South Vietnam, and their 5,300 beds were full. Most voters had to agree with Richard Nixon's latest campaign ad: "Never has so much military, economic, and diplomatic power been used so ineffectively as in Vietnam."[14]

The communist attacks on Saigon in May 1968—dubbed the "Second Wave"—were even more demoralizing than those of Tet's first-wave attacks. Once again—three months after the unlearned lesson of Tet—VC troops slipped into the capital with surprising ease. Faced with the prospect of prying them out in bloody house-to-house combat, the Americans and ARVN chose to bomb and shell them instead, with the predicted result. They destroyed another 30,000 homes and created another 155,000 refugees in Saigon in the effort to uproot small teams of VC infiltrators during the four-week battle. "The Viet Cong has no air force of his own," Saigon's police chief joked to a reporter. "So he uses *ours*."[15]

American and ARVN aircraft flew 500 sorties against Saigon and Cholon, dropping 500- and 750-pound fragmentation bombs as well as large quantities of napalm into city streets and lanes to destroy enemy foxholes, bunkers, and tunnels that had been dug under the concrete slabs of civilian homes and apartment buildings. Fixed-wing gunships fired 74,000 rounds into Saigon, and American and ARVN firebases shelled the city center out to a radius of five miles. A thousand B-52 strikes were flown on the outskirts of the city, just twenty-five miles from downtown, to hit the base camps and supply points of the VC 5th and 9th Divisions, which were shunting enemy troops into the capital.[16]

Artillery and airpower saved American and ARVN lives, but bombing South Vietnamese neighborhoods to kill small units of VC ensured that any allied victory in this war would be Pyrrhic. American intelligence had ample evidence by this stage that these suicidal VC forays were part of a larger communist strategy to disgust the American and South Vietnamese citizenry with the war being waged in their name and to fracture the allied war effort. As strategic theorist Herman Kahn tartly observed in 1968, American firepower created "empathy and support for the heroic

little man in black pajamas and antagonism toward the white man in the B-52."[17]

General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, who still commanded Saigon's National Police, was nearly killed in a firefight at the start of Mini-Tet. This made him the first and only South Vietnamese general wounded in ground combat in the entire war. As the injury to Loan's shattered right leg worsened, American doctors were rushed in to replace his Vietnamese surgeons.

Vice President Ky was especially solicitous, for among the 100,000 lucky men of the National Police, many of whom paid bribes to avoid military service, were the spies and informers who were Ky's eyes and ears. "As long as Ky remains in power I will remain in power," Loan liked to say, always adding: "And as long as I remain in power, Ky will remain in power." The general was saved, but not for long. He was transferred to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington in order to save the leg, and this gave Thieu a pretext to replace him a month later with one of his own cronies—ARVN Ranger commander Colonel Tran Van Hai. It was yet another demoralizing outburst of musical chairs, Loan's removal provoking gun battles between factions of police loyal to him and others loyal to the new chief.[18]

America's rescue of South Vietnam during Tet and Mini-Tet was not received gratefully. The bruising attacks of Mini-Tet coincided with conflict between the idled delegations in Paris. Thieu suspected (correctly) that the Americans would make massive concessions to exit the war. Secretary of Defense Clifford had already sketched the future—what he called the "long pull-out" of American forces and their replacement with South Vietnamese conscripts. The Americans might even permit Hanoi to leave NVA troops inside South Vietnam, and invite the Viet Cong to join the government in Saigon. Or they might just leave, Clifford contending in White House meetings that if the North and South could not agree on terms to terminate the war, then the United States should terminate it by departing.

Before talks even began, Xuan Thuy, who chaired Hanoi's delegation, peremptorily refused to pull NVA troops out of South Vietnam or even to recognize Thieu's government. Thieu became frantic, all the more so because the forty-one-year-old Viet Cong delegate Nguyen Thi Binh remained in Paris, demanding a seat at the table for her VC political wing. The talks, so hopefully begun, stalled for months as the opposing delegations argued over first principles. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker warned LBJ that "Thieu's sudden intransigence" might scupper any prospect of peace.[19]

In Saigon, peace was nowhere in sight. Of the air and artillery strikes that flattened and burned so much of Saigon in May and June, a rather obtuse MACV staff officer wrote: "The news media assigns the bulk of the destruction to air strikes, artillery, and fires. This creates controversy over whether the military success of the fire support compensated for the inevitable anger generated in the civilian populace." The "controversy" was plainly confined to the halls of MACV. Saigon's inhabitants saw no "military success" in the flattening of their homes and city.[20]

Only President Thieu seemed to have benefited from all of the fratricide and collateral damage. He had been busy since Tet using his presidential powers to remove or demote as many of Vice President Ky's men as he could. He had replaced Ky's appointees at the airport, customs office, and wharves, cutting into the vice president's income from narcotics and smuggling.

Then, on June 2, 1968, when Ky's brother-in-law, the police chiefs of Saigon and Cholon, and several other Ky appointees gathered to witness the destruction of the last VC units holding out in the South Vietnamese capital, an American helicopter gunship fired a short round that killed the brother-in-law, the police chiefs, and four other officials. The fallout from this "Cholon helicopter incident" was more acrimonious than usual because most of the casualties were Ky protégés, which ignited rumors that the Americans had deliberately targeted the group to strengthen Thieu. This paranoia fit with all of the other demoralizing rumors percolating now that LBJ was intensifying his efforts to make peace and end the war.[21]

On the North Vietnamese side, the Mini-Tet attacks, after the failure of the Tet attacks, seemed irrational in military terms, but they were perfectly rational politically. With LBJ seeking peace, the politburo was determined to create the impression of chaos, weakness, and hopelessness in South Vietnam, increase international pressure on American "immorality," and hasten Johnson's run for the exits. For this reason, Le Duan and his generals accepted yet another massacre at American hands: an estimated 26,000 communists killed and captured in battles that flared through and around the DMZ, Hue, Da Nang, Kontum City, the central coast, and Saigon. For Le Duan, it was worth it, to further divide South Vietnam and frustrate any remaining American hopes.[22]